

Summer Vacation

When the train leaned steeply, his own body was pulled along with it. Even after the rails straightened out, the train continued to clatter at regular, measured intervals. When they approached a station, the next stop and connecting lines were announced over the PA. Although he knew he had his directions right, Nao Takamura nevertheless pressed his face against the glass and peered at the station sign every time they slowed to a stop.

There were only a handful of people on the train: two girls about his age; an old man with a cane; a businessman who was falling asleep with his mouth open wide, like a carp waiting to be fed. There was also an older girl who looked like she was in high school. She was talking on a cell phone which had lots of keychains hanging off of it. Her talking was louder than the clattering of the train.

A moment ago, they had been ducking through what looked like an alleyway, drawing right up close to the houses. Now, suddenly the scenery opened up before his eyes. He could see the ocean through the window on the left. It was a deeper blue than the sky, and it sparkled and glittered. The sight was enough to make his heart beat faster. The train ran along the ocean for a little while before diving once again into an alleyway-like gap between the houses.

Tsumagi... said the sign at the station. He got off. The coolness of the train had made him completely forget how hot it was outside. The strong rays felt like scorching prickles on his skin, and the shadow at his feet was stark. A sheen of sweat appeared on his brow.

There was no shopping district right outside the station, like the town where Nao lived. There was a bus stop out front, but no cars on the road in front of it. Nao shouldered his backpack and took out a crumpled piece of paper from the pocket of his shorts. He stopped an older man in coveralls who tried to slip past him.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where the police station is?" The goodhearted man took him to the police station beside an eyeglass store, about a five-minute walk from the station. There was a young officer sitting inside the police station, and when he noticed Nao, he crouched down with a gentle expression on his face.

"What's wrong? Are you lost?" he asked.

"I want to go to the place that's on this paper."

The officer peered at the wrinkled scrap of paper as he knitted his brow.

"Hmmm," he said. "It's a bit far from here. For you, it might be a thirty-minute walk or so."

"I can walk."

"What grade are you in?"

"Grade three."

The officer grimaced and hummed indecisively before going around behind his desk and retrieving a piece of paper.

"This is a map of the area. You're right here." He marked the middle of the map with a marker. "Keep going right on this path. When you see Ito's Barbershop on your right-hand side, turn left. Keep walking, and take the third turn to the left. Then you have to walk quite a bit more, and you should see a small bridge called Ginrou Bridge. Cross that and walk for a bit more, and that's where it'll be."

The police station and his destination were now connected by a fluorescent-yellow line.

"Are you going to Grandma's place? A friend's house?"

Nao looked up from the map and stared at the officer in the eye.

"I'm going to see my father."

"Your father?"

"My parents got divorced when I was small. My father lives here."

The officer suddenly looked at Nao with pity. "...I see," he said. "Does your father know you're coming?"

"No."

"I see," the officer murmured again.

"Thank you for giving me directions." Nao bowed like he did at his school's morning assembly, and left the police station with the map in hand. He took the path to the right and kept walking. His forehead was sweaty, and so was his back. It was sticky and uncomfortable. His head was hot, too. Just then, he remembered how his mother always told him to wear a hat.

He glanced left and right over and over, and when he started getting anxious about whether he had gone too far or not, he was relieved to see Itou's Barbershop. He arrived at the small bridge called Ginrou Bridge, written in Chinese characters he could not read. He built up momentum and leapt across it, and was able to cross it in seven steps. From there, he looked at the map and counted the number of houses. The fourth one—this was it.

Dad lives here. The thought made his heart suddenly beat faster. His father's house was a little far away from the rest. It was surrounded on all sides by a wooden fence about the same height as a grown adult. Nao glanced at his surroundings as he walked once around the house. Apart from the entrance facing the sidewalk, there was another entrance on the opposite side of the house. At the sidewalk entrance, Nao pushed the wooden gate lightly, and it yielded easily and swung inwards. He slowly and cautiously peeked inside.

The yard was very spacious, and there were many trees. The path leading from the gate to the entrance of the house looked like it had been paved with concrete. *What should I do, what should I do?* Nao carefully stepped forward, still battling his confusion.

There was a nameplate on the pillar at the entrance. It read "Kitagawa". Nao spread open the piece of paper that was now damp from clenching it in his hand. His father's name was Takafumi Douno. His grandmother had taught him how to read the Chinese characters. But the name on the nameplate was not it.

Does that mean this isn't Dad's house? Did I get my directions wrong? His thoughts were broken by a dog barking. His whole body flinched. There was a dog barking in the far end of the yard. It was a sandy-coloured dog. Its leash was too short for it to come this far, so the dog stood on its hind legs and barked at him loudly. Nao was terrified enough to wet his pants, but his knees shook and he could not move.

"What's wrong, Ao?"

He heard an adult voice.

"Is someone there?"

A man emerged from the dense green leaves of the yard. He was wearing a T-shirt and shorts.

On his feet were bamboo sandals. He was really tall. His hair was short, and his face was... scary. His eyes were scary. His father had looked so much more gentle in the photos.

"Who're you?" The man looked down at him.

"A... Are you my dad?"

The man slowly tilted his head.

"M—My name is Nao Takamura. I came to—to see my dad."

When my dad sees me, he'll smile, pick me up and say, "Nao, you've gotten so big." Then he'd say, "Did you come here all by yourself? Good for you." That was what he had expected, but his real dad was scary. Very scary.

"What's your dad's name?"

Nao felt like crying that his father would ask him such a question.

"Takafumi Douno."

The man crouched in front of him and reached out. Feeling like the hand was about to hit him, Nao flinched. The man's large palm did not hit him, but instead ruffled Nao's damp hair so roughly it hurt.

"Your dad is at work. He won't be home 'til evening," the man said brusquely. Nao had assumed he could see his dad if he went to his house. He had never even thought of what to do if he wasn't home. *But at least this scary man isn't my dad.* He was relieved at the thought.

"Where's your mom? Isn't she here with you?"

Nao gulped and gripped the straps of his backpack.

"...She's on a trip. She said I could stay at my dad's place while she was away." It was a lie. It was true that his mother had gone on a trip, but she had told him to stay at Grandma's place while she was gone. He had gone to his grandmother's, but had wanted to see his father so badly that he had lied to her, telling her that his mom had said he was allowed to go over to his dad's house to play. He had left his grandmother's house this morning. He had transferred once on the train and clattered along, finally arriving at the station nearest to his father's house past noon.

The man was staring at him.

"How old are you?" he finally asked.

"Nine years old."

"Which means you're in third grade, huh? Is school fun?"

Nao nodded once.

"Do you have lots of friends?"

"Average."

The man grinned and stood up. He grabbed Nao's wrist as he still clung to his shoulder straps.

"Come on in and wait inside until Takafumi gets home."

Nao was taken into the house by the tall man, who half-dragged him by the hand. The house looked old on the outside, but it looked old on the inside, too. The entrance had a steep step. The faded white walls had cracks in them, and were peeling in the corners. The lighting on the ceiling had no covers, and the bare light bulbs dangled in the air.

When he stepped into the hallway, the floorboards creaked. The man brought Nao to a room with *tatami* flooring. It was a bare room with sparse furnishings. There was a television against the

wall, and a large low table in the middle of the room. That was it. However, the top of the table was littered with many sheets and books, pencils and erasers.

There was a large window across the room from the entrance, and it was thrown open wide. Beyond that was the porch and the yard. In the yard there was a dog house with a red roof, and the same dog was barking with its snout in the air.

The man left the room. Nao shrugged his backpack off and put it down against the wall. His watch said it was two o'clock. *I wonder when Dad's gonna come home*, he wondered, when he felt a breeze on the back of his neck. It was hot outside, but the breeze made it cool.

"Here."

The man brought him cold tea on a tray. There was a banana beside it.

"Oh. Thank you." Nao was hungry, since he had only had breakfast and eaten nothing for lunch. He immediately went for the banana first and stuffed his mouth. The cold barley tea went smoothly down his throat. It felt cold and nice. Eating kept him fully occupied. When he was done, Nao looked up at the man to see him sitting cross-legged at the table and making scraping sounds as he drew something out on paper.

"Um—"

The man stopped and looked up.

"Who are you, mister? Isn't this my dad's house?"

The man was looking at him, but wasn't answering. The cicadas were buzzing loudly in the yard. Finally, the man's lips appeared to move.

"I'm Kitagawa. I'm your dad's friend, and I live here with him."

"Oh."

He began drawing again.

"Um—"

His hand stopped. Mister¹ looked this way.

"What kind of person is my dad?"

The man's eyes moved away from him and roved. "Let's see... he's honest and gentle." *Gentle*. Hearing that made him happy. The face he had seen in photos had been smiling gently, too.

"How old is my dad?"

"His age? He's... two years older than me, so forty-six."

"And his height? How tall is he?"

"I think about 170? He's shorter than me."

"What does he like to eat?"

"Curry, *mapo doufu*, stuff like that."

"I like curry, too."

Mister grinned. "So do I."

At first he'd thought Mister was a scary old man, but he wasn't. His face looked gentle when he smiled.

1 Although Kitagawa is called "Mister" by Nao throughout, the original Japanese word *ojisan* can also mean "Uncle".

"What kind of work does my dad do?"

"He calculates stuff for a factory that makes food."

"Uh-huh..." His father, whom he had only seen in photos, was slowly being pieced together into a human shape, like he was putting pieces of a miniature model together. Suddenly the dog barked, and Nao's shoulders tensed.

"You don't like dogs?"

"I'm scared of getting bitten, so I usually don't get close."

"Ao can be noisy when he barks, but he doesn't bite."

Even though Mister said he didn't bite, the dog was still scary when it was barking with its big jaws and its big voice. Nao had wanted a smaller dog like a dachshund or a chihuahua, or a cat, but they weren't allowed to keep pets in their current apartment.

"Is this dog my dad's?"

"He's both of ours. We have a cat, too."

"A cat?"

Mister went out to the porch. "Shiro, Shiro," he called, and a white cat came out of the bushes across from them. It meowed in a cute voice. The cat sprang up onto the porch and purred as Mister petted it. Mister scooped it up and brought it over to him.

"Wanna try touching it?"

Nao carefully reached out. The cat had soft, fluffy fur, and it felt nice. Mister handed the cat over to Nao, but the cat arched its back, twisted out of the child's arms and escaped into the bushes.

"It can be a bit shy," Mister muttered, then sat down in front of the table. Nao peered at his hands as he wielded a pencil. It was a drawing of a large building and a woman.

"Mister, are you drawing a picture?"

"Yeah."

"It's soooo good. You're like an artist!" Their eyes met, and Mister grinned.

"Want me to draw a picture of you?"

"What? Really?"

Mister pushed the half-finished drawing aside and took out a fresh sheet. His pencil raced across it with speedy strokes. Thin lines overlapped before Nao's eyes and formed the shape of a face.

"There. Done."

Not even ten minutes had passed, and on the desk was an image of his face.

"Wow! It looks just like me! That's so cool!"

Whenever Mister grinned, gentle wrinkles formed at the edges of his eyes.

"Drawing is my job," he said.

"So you really are an artist, Mister?"

"I illustrate for books or do individual pieces. Stuff like this."

He drew out a book buried in the mountain of papers on the table, flipped open to a page, and showed it to him. There were lots of words on the page, mixed with what looked like English. It looked like a difficult book. There were pictures, but he couldn't tell what they were of.

"What's this a picture of?"

"It's a tendon of the foot. This is a book that doctors look at."

"Okay," Nao replied, without really knowing what a tendon was. He flipped through the pages, but there were a lot of disturbing pictures and photos, and he closed the book soon after.

Mister had begun drawing again.

"Um... can I make a phone call?" Nao asked.

"Over there," Mister said, pointing at the telephone handset near the TV. Nao took the handset out of the charger and left the room discreetly. Once he got to the end of the hallway, he phoned his grandmother.

"Hello? Grandma? I got to Dad's place safely. Yeah, I was fine taking the train by myself..."

His grandmother asked to speak to his father, saying she wanted to say hello.

"Dad, um... seems to be busy at work. Bye." With that, he hung up the phone without letting her reply. He had told his grandmother he would stay at his father's place for three days. On the fourth day, his mother would come back from her trip overseas and would be coming to pick him up at his grandmother's house.

"Thank you for letting me use the phone." Even after he returned the phone with those words, Mister said nothing to him. His face almost touched the paper and he was focused completely on drawing. Nao sat down with his back to the wall. The wall clock read 2:45. Nao's watch was five minutes faster.

How much longer until I get to see Dad? he wondered as he closed his eyes. *When I see him, what should I say? Maybe he wouldn't recognize me unless I introduce myself first. The air is cool, but it's still a little too hot here....* Nao's thoughts trailed off, and before he realized it, he was asleep.

Hey—said a voice. It was past four when he was shaken awake. Nao rubbed his eyes with his hands. The sun, which had been shining on the porch, now came up to Nao's ankle.

"Takafumi always comes back past six. I'm going to go grocery shopping for today's dinner while I walk Ao. Wanna come?"

"Yeah!"

Mister placed a hand on Nao's head and ruffled his hair so hard it hurt.

He was told to wear a hat because it was still hot out. When Nao said he'd forgotten his, a straw hat that was much too big was plopped onto his head. He thought it looked kind of dorky, but he couldn't bring himself to say he didn't want to wear it.

Ao barked a lot, but didn't bite. When Nao held his leash, Ao wagged his tail furiously and hopped on his hind legs as he playfully jumped on Nao.

"Unlike Shiro, this guy's a friendly one. He's happy because he thinks he'll get to play with you."

Mister left Ao to Nao, and lumbered on ahead of him. Ao followed Mister, and Nao was dragged along. He realized dogs were much, much stronger than what he'd thought. Sometimes Ao yanked so hard at the leash he thought his arm would pop off, but it was fun.

He'd been envious seeing other kids walk their dogs in the park near his apartment. He'd tried not to feel that way, though. If he let himself be jealous, he would start wondering why he wasn't allowed to have one, and he'd feel horrible afterwards.

"Mister, what kind of dog is Ao?"

"Probably a mutt."

They walked along the small river which he'd crossed in seven steps. The further they walked, the wider the river got, and the sidewalk also widened.

"You didn't buy it at a store?"

Mister turned around and looked at him curiously. "Why would you buy one at a store?"

"...All my friends who have dogs said they bought them at the store."

"You can just pick up a dog anywhere."

"Yeah, but..."

Ao barked. Mister stopped in his tracks and squatted to pet Ao on the head. Ao was licking Mister's face.

"This Ao is the second one. The first Ao, his mom, was abandoned near my workplace when I still used to work at construction sites."

"What kind of work do you do at construction sites?"

Nao squatted like Mister.

"Digging holes, making dirt piles... well, manual labour. But I couldn't work there anymore because I got hurt."

"You got hurt?"

"A huge piece of lumber fell, and my left arm got pinned underneath. After that, I stopped being able to put strength in my left arm, and I couldn't hold or carry heavy stuff over my shoulder anymore. I could hold a book, but that wasn't going to be any use at the site. So I was wondering what I could do to make a living, and Takafumi said, 'why don't you draw?' From then on, my job became to draw pictures."

When they got to the riverbank, Ao dashed all the way to the bottom. Yanked by his leash, Nao tipped forward on the riverbank, and began tumbling down. The leash slipped out of his hand, and Ao trailed it behind him as he ran happily around Nao.

Nao's knees and his palms hurt from falling down. He heard laughter, and turned around to see Mister looking this way and guffawing. He made it sound so funny that Nao started to think it was funny, too. Even though he was hurt, he couldn't help but chuckle. Mister picked up the straw hat that had fallen off Nao's head partway down, and came down towards him.

"You okay?"

"It's nothing." It actually hurt a bit, but Nao sucked it up. The straw hat was plopped back on his head. Mister turned back west towards the sun.

"—You can tell it's summer. It's still light outside in the evening," he murmured.

In the tiny kitchen, I helped make curry.

"You gotta help, too," said Mister, and he made me put on a huge apron. While I peeled the onions, tears started streaming from my eyes. When Mister saw me, he laughed again. Fed up with being laughed at, I tried to hold them in, but my tears didn't stop running.

I also used a knife for the first time. At home, mom never let me touch it. Unsure of how to use

it, I stabbed the carrot from above with a *thunk*. Mister clutched his sides as he laughed. He was far from scary. He laughed a lot.

We let the vegetables and meat stew for a good while, and right when we put the curry *roux*² in, we heard a voice at the entrance. "I'm home," it said.

"Takafumi's home," muttered Mister. Dad was home. Dad, whom I'd only seen in photos before. *Creak, creak*. The footsteps were coming closer.

"Kei, is someone over?"

I couldn't see his face, but I could hear his voice first.

"Are you in the kitchen?"

I saw a figure in the entrance of the kitchen. It was Dad. I knew it the moment I saw him. He looked a little older than his photos. Dad was wearing a jacket and a tie, and he looked like the businessmen I saw at the station. My heart started pounding. I knew I had to introduce myself, or else Dad probably wouldn't know who I was. I tried to speak, but I felt nervous like I did at school plays, and I couldn't find my voice.

Dad was looking at me curiously.

"And this boy?" Dad asked Mister.

"Your kid."

"What?" cried Dad as his eyes widened. He put his hand to his half-open mouth, and drew his eyebrows together. I felt a pang in my chest at his face, which seemed to look at me like I was unwanted trouble.

Nao bit his lip and politely bowed his head.

"I'm Nao Takamura. I heard from my mom that you got divorced when I was little."

"Oh... right..." Dad murmured, then looked at Mister. "Did Mariko bring him here?"

"No. He came alone. I thought you and your wife had something figured out already?"

"I haven't heard anything from her. Even if she'd told me something, I would have talked to you about it in advance."

Dad raked his hand through his bangs and looked down at Nao with a slightly severe expression.

"...I want to speak to your mother. Could you tell me her phone number?"

"My mom is on a trip. She said I could stay with you during that time." His voice shook as he told the lie.

"She might have said that, but I still want to talk to her. I want you to tell me her phone number." His wording was gentle, but there was a finality in his tone that wouldn't take no for an answer. Nao told him his mother's cell phone number, and his dad called his mom on the spot.

"It's not getting through," Dad muttered as he flipped his cell phone shut.

"My mom's on a trip overseas."

At Nao's words, Dad looked down and let out a long sigh.

"Can we eat? I'm starving." Mister stirred the curry lazily in stark contrast to Dad's bristling aura.

2 Blocks of dried/concentrated curry sauce, which can be melted straight into the meat and vegetable broth.

We ate dinner in the room with the table that Mister was drawing at. I had fun walking a dog for the first time. I had fun shopping and making curry. But eating wasn't fun. Even though I was hungry, I didn't feel like eating.

"What has your mother told you about me?"

Dad asked me questions once in a while.

"She said she divorced you right after I was born."

There were so many things I wanted to ask before I met Dad. But now I couldn't remember any of them. I'd only eaten half of how much I usually eat, and I was already full.

"Did your mother say anything else?"

"She didn't tell me much about you."

It was very quiet at nighttime. The sound of cars passing by outside was few and far-between. There was a TV, but it wasn't on. I couldn't ask for it to be turned on. If this was Grandma's place, I could, but I couldn't say that here.

"Oh, but... I had a sister... Grandma told me I had a sister, but she died."

Dad looked away awkwardly. From then on until the meal was over, Dad neither talked to me nor tried to make eye contact with me.

After the meal, I was told to take a bath. The bathroom was dim and tiled, and the tiles were chipped and cracked in places, and were dirty. I quickly washed my hair and body, but didn't get into the bathtub. I changed into my pyjamas, and was walking down the dim hallway when I spotted light seeping out of the room with the table. I could hear Dad's voice.

"I don't know what Mariko's thinking. After all this time, why would she choose to send him over to us now, with no word at all?"

My arms shook as I clutched the clothes I'd changed out of.

"Maybe because the kid'll be alone during her trip?" That was Mister's voice.

"Mariko has her sister and her parents."

"Maybe they couldn't take care of him."

"But still, there's something off. I haven't seen him even once since he was born. Mariko knows that."

I wanted to burst out of the house. I wanted to go back to Grandma's place. Dad thought I was a nuisance. I knew he did—

"I'm not saying I don't want to take care of him, I just—I wish I had time to mentally prepare myself. And I don't know how much Mariko has told him. I can't say anything without being afraid of letting something slip."

It turned quiet as Dad and Mister stopped talking. But I couldn't get close to that room.

"Maybe the trip is just an excuse, and Nao just wanted to see you," I heard Mister say quietly.

"See me?"

"Kids want to see their parents, don't they? A long time ago, I used to want to see my dad, too. Now, I don't really care."

The *tatami* mats creaked. A looming shadow crossed the light seeping into the hallway. Nao stepped forward, not wanting them to think he had been eavesdropping. It was Mister who came out

into the hallway.

"How was your bath? Good?" Mister grinned. Nao nodded silently.

"You like eating watermelons?"

"...Yeah."

"Then I'll cut you some. Sit tight in the room."

Mister went into the kitchen. If I went back to that room now, I'd be alone with Dad. Suddenly my feet felt heavy, and I stamped lightly on the spot. I didn't want to be alone with Dad. But if I stayed in the hallway, they'd probably ask me why I wasn't going into the room.

When I shuffled into the room, Dad looked this way. I felt like his eyes were saying, "You're a nuisance," and it scared me.

"Thank you for letting me use the bath." I thanked him and went to my backpack in the corner of the room. I turned my back to Dad and stuffed my dirty clothes into the bottom of my bag.

"It must have been a long way here from your house. How did you get here?"

It was back to the questions he'd been asking at dinner.

"The train," I answered without turning around.

"You took the train by yourself? Good for you. Did your mother tell you this address?"

I nodded with my back still turned. It was a lie. Mom wouldn't tell me when I told her I wanted to see Dad. That's why I lied to Grandma and got her to tell me by saying Mom had told me to ask her.

"I sliced some watermelon."

Mister came into the room. We sat side-by-side on the porch and ate them together. Dad said he was full, and didn't come out to the porch beside me, and didn't touch the watermelon.

Dad and Mister said they didn't have a guest futon, so the three of us lay down in the same futon together. I lay down beside Dad, but I was nervous, and thought about all sorts of things and couldn't sleep.

Every year during summer vacation, I went to Grandma's house. I was playing in the closets one day last year when I found old photo albums. I found Mom's photos in one of them. She was carrying a little girl, and beside her was a gentle-looking man. There was nothing written on the photo, but I felt like this man must be my dad. When I showed the album to Grandma, she told me the gentle-looking man really was my dad, and the girl was my big sister who had died.

At the end of the summer, when Mom came to pick me up at Grandma's place, I told her I wanted to meet Dad.

"Absolutely not!" she'd snapped, looking pale. That scared me and made me cry at first, but I wanted to see Dad more and more as the days passed.

I'd really, *really* wanted to see him, but this was different from what I'd thought. If this was what it was going to be like, I shouldn't have come to meet him at all. The futon shifted as I felt someone roll over beside me. Dad was rolling over a lot. Maybe he's having trouble sleeping, too, I thought. Then, our eyes met in the dimness.

"You can't sleep?"

“...I think I’ll fall asleep soon.”

Nao pulled the towel blanket up to his mouth.

“I know it must be hard to sleep, since you’re in a strange house and the futon is tiny...”

One futon was really small for three people. And there was one thing that had been on Nao’s mind. Dad’s voice seemed gentler now—now, he felt like he could ask. He opened his mouth.

“Why do you and Mister sleep in the same futon?”

Despite how dim it was in the room, he could clearly sense Dad grimace.

“That’s because...”

“That’s because your dad and I are poor,” answered Mister, who was on the other side of Dad.

“That’s why we don’t have a guest futon, either.”

That one word “poor” was enough to convince Nao. Although the yard was big, this house itself was very old. The walls were dirty, the bathroom was dirty, and the halls creaked every time he walked down them. Their dog, too, had been picked up and not bought from a pet store. There’d been lots of hints that they were poor.

“I don’t have much, but I brought some allowance. I’ll pay for my food.”

Suddenly, Mister burst out laughing.

“Kei!” Dad scolded him sharply. To Nao, he said, “We may not be rich, but we have enough to pay for food. You don’t have to worry about that stuff. Just go to sleep.”

Nao had only said he’d pay because they said they were poor. He had only tried to be as considerate as he could, but he’d only made himself more of a nuisance. His chest began to throb in pain. Nao turned his back to his dad, pulled the towel blanket over his head, and cried a little.

I couldn’t remember when I’d fallen asleep. It was probably late. Mister woke me up at seven-thirty in the morning. I washed my face and stepped into the room with the table. Dad was wearing a suit and kneeling at the table, eating breakfast.

“Morning,” he said.

“Good morning...” I answered in a small voice. The meal laid out on the table was *miso* soup, egg, and rice. I always had bread in the morning, and didn’t feel like eating rice, either. I left most of my portion untouched. Dad said his greetings and left before eight. He hadn’t said anything apart from “Morning.” But I was kind of relieved that Dad was gone.

“Hey!” Mister called to me. His voice came from the kitchen. When I peeked in, he was standing at the sink, gesturing for me to come over.

“Help me out.”

“With what?”

“We’re gonna wash the dishes. You ate out of them, too, didn’t you?”

I went to the sink, put on an apron, and grabbed a sponge. But the sink was deep and it was hard to wash in it. I wobbled on my tip-toes until Mister told me to get the stepping stool that was in the shed.

I went out through the front door and all the way around to the back yard. I was startled when Ao started barking at me. He didn’t seem to mean to surprise me, though. He wagged his tail so hard

it looked like it would fly off, and panted enthusiastically.

Nao found the storage shed in the yard, which was dilapidated like the bird coop they no longer used at primary school. The corrugated iron roof was rusty, and the door had been left open. He dug out a dusty step-ladder from the collapsing shed and returned to the kitchen to find Mister with a wrinkled brow and a guilty expression on his face.

"I ended up finishing the dishes." He clucked his tongue, and Nao clutched his sides as he dissolved in laughter. Mister scratched his head and said, "But you're doing the dishes at dinner." He went back to the room with the table, and placed a cookie tin on its large surface. It was a little early for a ten o'clock snack, but nevertheless, Nao peered inside expectantly. Inside the tin were pencils, erasers, and pens. Next, Mister put a large case on the table and took out a piece of white paper.

"Are you gonna do your work, Mister?"

"Yeah."

"Can I watch?"

"Sure."

Mister began to draw. His pencil whizzed back and forth like it was alive, and it was interesting to watch people's faces and buildings forming on the paper. But even that got boring after a long time.

Nao moved to a corner of the room and hugged his knees. The cicadas whined. Ao was curled up in the shade of a tree. Shiro was nowhere to be seen this morning. It was probably only the beginning of the day, but he was already so bored he felt like he would melt.

"Hey."

Nao lifted his face. Mister was looking straight this way.

"Did you bring swimming trunks?"

"...Yeah."

"Want me to take you swimming?"

"Yeah!"

His boredom disappeared. Nao could feel his own mouth stretching into a grin.

The bicycle sped along as fast as a car. It was scary. That was why I held on as tight as I could to the broad back in front of me. First, we went into an old-looking Western clothing store in the shopping district.

"I'm looking for swimming trunks," Mister said. A hobbling old woman with a cane looked at me.

"We don't have any for children," she said gruffly.

"I'm looking for adult-sized ones," Mister said. The old woman huffed in annoyance and brought out red trunks, tiger-striped trunks, and blue trunks with white hibiscus flowers.

"Which ones would you pick?" Mister asked me, and when I pointed at the blue ones, Mister bought them. Once we left the store, I whispered in his ear.

"That old lady was so rude."

Mister didn't seem to mind at all.

"A lot of things become troublesome when you get old," he said.

We rode along the bumpy sidewalk, which made my butt hurt a little. We passed the police station where I'd asked for directions yesterday, went through the front of the station, and crossed the train tracks. As we went down a gentle slope, I could see the ocean beyond it. It was the ocean I'd seen on my way here. It was just as sparkly as I'd last seen it.

The beach was an endless stretch of sand. There were lots of adults and kids. Mister left the bike at the beach's bike racks and changed into his swimming trunks in the change room beside a shop. We left our clothes and bags in a locker, freeing our hands. Now that we were fully ready, I couldn't hold myself in anymore. I went running out into the sand. Mister followed behind.

The sand made soft crunching sounds. The small grains got into my shoes, and my feet felt gritty. It was annoying, so I took off my shoes and went barefoot. The sand felt a little hot.

At primary school we'd learned that before getting into a pool we had to do warm-up exercises, then enter feet-first, then splash water onto our chests to get our body used to the cold water. I remembered everything. But what did that matter now?

I raised a shout as I waded into the ocean. I splashed the water aside, letting the waves hit my body full-force. They receded, then came again. It was different from the waves at the pool. Way different.

It was my first time swimming in the ocean. We'd gone to the ocean on school hikes, but it was still spring and we hadn't been allowed to swim. We could only play on the sand near the shore.

A massive wave washed over my head.

"It's salty!" I said as I spat the water out.

"Of course it's salty. It's the ocean," Mister said, laughing. Then he started splashing water into my face like he was teasing me. It made me mad, so I splashed him back. Then, he splashed me so hard that I couldn't retaliate. I ran away, but Mister chased after me. I wanted to run faster, but the water weighed my legs down and I couldn't run very well. Soon, I fell forward. My body sank into the water, and I was flailing until I was grabbed by the arm and hoisted up out of the water.

"Mister, stop being mean!" I yelled.

"Sorry," Mister grinned, not looking sorry at all. Small waves lapped against us.

"Nao, don't you wanna try going to the deep end?" Mister was looking out into the horizon.

"No way. I'd be scared if I drowned."

"We won't go *that* deep. If you're scared, you can ride on my shoulders."

My heart soared.

"C-Can I? Can I really?"

Mister broke into a grin and dove underneath Nao's crotch, then stood up. The water sloshed as it cascaded off of him, and Nao's line of sight was suddenly elevated.

"Whoa! Cool! I'm so high up!"

"Hey, don't kick your feet like that. You'll fall."

Mister grabbed my feet, so I settled down. But my feelings weren't settled down. I was excited. I was really getting a ride on his shoulders. I'd always wanted to do this. I'd always been jealous of kids who got to ride on their dads' shoulders. I'd always told myself I had to do without because I didn't have a dad.

Mister walked towards the deep end with me still on his shoulders. Soon, it got so deep the water came up to Mister's shoulders, even without any waves.

"My feet won't touch the bottom anymore, would they?"

"Probably not."

"If I fall off, would I drown?"

The moment I said those words, I was thrown off with a splash. My body sank with a gurgle, and everything looked blue. I could see lots of bubbles rising before my eyes. I couldn't breathe. I was scared. Once I floated up and got my face out of the water, Mister pulled me by the arms. I threw my arms around his big neck. I'd been scared out of my mind being thrown off, but here I was clinging to the very person who threw me into the water. I was patted on my wet head, and even though I was angry at him, I felt happy. *He's like my dad. My real dad*, I thought.

We returned to the shallow end. My feet could touch the bottom now, and I wasn't scared anymore, but I held on tight to Mister's hand, which was like a father's hand. Mister Meany was looking at something. His eyes were glued to the big black inner tube that was bobbing on the water in the distance.

"Nao, what's that?"

"I think it's an inner tube."

"It's huge."

The person using the big doughnut-like inner tube was an adult.

"There were lots beside the shop. It said you could rent them."

The big hand pulled mine.

"We're gonna borrow one of those."

"Okay!" I answered loudly.

We rented a big, doughnut-shaped inner tube. Mister settled his bottom in the big hole in the middle, and flung his arms and legs out of the doughnut and bobbed in the water. I sat on top of him, my body overlapping Mister's. I closed my eyes. When we were rocking gently back and forth like this, it made me feel like I'd become an otter.

Staying still like this was starting to make me hot. The sun's rays beat down on my whole body, and it hurt.

"Mister, it's hot."

Mister splashed sea water on me. Then it felt cool.

"Wonder where we'll drift off to if we keep sitting here like this," Mister murmured.

"We'll probably end up waaaaay out there."

"You think we'll get to Spain?"

"Foreign countries are really far away. We'll probably get eaten by sharks first."

"Sharks, huh."

"Oh, but before that, we might go hungry and die."

"Then we'll just catch fish to eat."

I could see Mister's hands flexing.

"We'll catch 'em and swallow 'em whole. They'll be hopping when we catch them. They'll still be hopping in your stomach."

I imagined swallowing a fish whole. It would be scary to swallow big ones, but I felt like I'd be okay with small fish, like a *medaka*.

"I'm hungry..." Mister muttered.

"I'm hungry," I muttered after him.

"Let's get something to eat." With that, Mister splish-splashed the water with both hands and paddled the long way back to shore.

The shop on the seashore was packed with people. Since there were no seats inside, we bought curry and cola and went outside. Under the parasol, I imitated Mister and sat cross-legged. The curry tasted like something I'd eaten somewhere before, and even though we'd just had curry yesterday, it still tasted super good.

After we ate, we swam for a bit. Mister had started napping in the shadow of the embankment, so I played with the inner tube by myself. But it got boring quickly, so I dragged the inner tube over beside Mister, and took a nap with him.

Once the sun had started setting in the west, they began to prepare to go home. They returned the inner tube, and retrieved their belongings from the locker. When Nao and Mister arrived at the bike racks hand-in-hand, they discovered that the bike was gone. They circled the bike racks three times and spent about thirty minutes searching the area, but they couldn't find the bike after all. Nao began to tear up while they searched. Today had been fun. It had been so unbelievably fun that he was angry that he'd have to feel so horrible right before going home.

"Why're you crying?"

As Nao burst into tears, Mister squatted down in front of him.

"Whoever stole your bike should die," Nao said.

Mister ruffled Nao's hair, took his hand, and stood up.

"We'll just have to take a long walk home."

"What about your bike?"

"I'll report it to the police, then I guess I'll come back to look for it tomorrow."

Nao walked along, his hand drawn by Mister. They had flown down the slope by bike on the way here, but now they walked the way back up, digging their heels in with each step. The hand that held Nao's was hot. But he wanted to keep holding hands. *If a stranger saw us, I wonder if he'd think Mister and I were father and son*, Nao wondered.

"Today was like life itself." Mister wiped the sweat off his forehead with his right hand as he climbed the slope.

"Life?"

"You have fun things, then you sometimes have not-so-fun things." *Not-so-fun*, Mister had said, but his face didn't look annoyed or angry at all.

"Aren't you mad that someone stole your bike, Mister?"

"Of course I am."

Nao peered at Mister's face. "But you don't look it at all."

"Well, I might not be angry enough to cry about it. Starting tomorrow I'd have to do my

shopping on foot. That's about all the inconvenience it'll cause for me. It's no big deal."

Since the owner of the bike wasn't angry, Nao felt weird being the only one, so he decided to chase the angry feelings out of his heart.

Mister went into the police station that Nao had gone to for directions before. The officer inside wasn't the young one from yesterday. During the thirty minutes it took to file the complaint, Nao stood beside Mister and clutched the hem of his shirt.

By the time they exited the police station, the sky was starting to look a lot more like evening. When Nao tugged at Mister's shirt, he took Nao's hand in his. Even if they weren't talking, it was okay. Just holding hands was enough.

If Mister was my dad, or if my dad was someone like him, every day would probably be so fun.

When they arrived home, the light in the entrance was on. *Dad's home.* Nao's heart quailed.

"We're home." Mister rattled the sliding door open. Dad came out, wearing a scowl that instantly gave away his bad mood.

"Matsuo from Sakubunkan phoned," he said.

Mister suddenly looked at his feet guiltily. Dad put on his shoes.

"You stay here," he said to Nao. He took Mister outside and closed the sliding door tightly shut behind them.

Left all alone, Nao could do nothing but stand still. He could hear a voice on the other side of the door. It sounded angry. *Maybe he's talking about me.* Nao quietly opened the door a crack.

"Matsuo called three times asking about your progress. He told me your deadline is tomorrow! You said yesterday you'd only finished two drawings."

In the middle of the concrete walkway, Dad and Mister were standing across from each other.

"I was planning to do them this evening."

"You said this morning you weren't sure if you could finish them all today. You said so yourself that you don't like rushing because your work gets messy."

Mister scratched his head.

"...Unexpected turn of events."

Dad glared at Mister from head to toe. "You didn't answer the phone when I called once before lunch. Where were you all this time?"

"We were at the beach... you know, for a bit."

Dad pressed a hand to his forehead in exasperation. "This isn't the time to be going on a leisurely trip."

It's my fault. The thought made Nao's chest ache. Mister stared at his feet like a scolded child.

"I know you're doing this out of consideration for me. I appreciate that. But I don't want you to neglect your work because of that."

Unable to stand any more, Nao threw the sliding door wide open. The two of them turned around almost at the same time.

"M-Mister was keeping me company. That's why..."

Dad only glanced at me, then went back to glaring at Mister silently with his arms folded. Mister scratched the back of his head again.

"...I'll do my work properly. And I won't cut corners."

After a short silence, Dad let out a measured sigh.

"The two of you, come in through the back door and take a shower. I'll keep the door unlocked. Then we'll have dinner afterwards."

Mister beckoned, and Nao followed. They entered through the back door and went to the bathroom, which was right beside it.

"Since we don't have time," said Mister, and they bathed together. As warm water was dumped over Nao's head, grains of sand formed thin streams on the tiles at his feet. He had no idea where they'd been stuck to him.

"I hate Dad." The sentence naturally escaped his lips. Mister cupped Nao's face with his hands.

"I love your dad lots," he said.

"But... but... he was so mad at you."

"That was my fault. Takafumi wasn't wrong about anything."

Despite how much he'd been yelled at, Mister didn't seem angry at all. Nao had no idea how he could go without getting angry.

"B-But Dad is a grouch. He just thinks I'm a nuisance. It's written on his face."

Mister smiled slyly.

"That's not the look of someone who thinks you're a nuisance. He just doesn't know what to do. Adults need time to mentally prepare, too."

"Mentally prepare?"

"You know, for a lot of things."

Once they finished their bath, they went to the room with the table, where dinner was laid out. Dinner was *somen* noodles, fried chicken, and fruit salad. It was awkward with Dad there, but Nao was starving, so he ate a lot. The food on their plates disappeared gradually, but it remained very quiet. Both Mister and Dad didn't talk, so Nao didn't talk, either.

Once the meal was over, the table was cleaned off immediately. Mister brought out the cookie tin. He was going to start working.

"It's time for you to go to bed," Nao was told by Dad, and was kicked out of the room.

Faced with no other choice, Nao headed to the bedroom. He found a new futon laid out on the floor. He wondered if it was for him, but since no one had told him so, he couldn't bring himself to climb in. He paced around the futon for a while until Dad came in afterwards.

"You can sleep there starting from today," he said, pointing to the new futon. Yesterday, Nao had felt cramped sleeping in the same futon. But now that he had his own set, he felt like he was being told that they didn't want to sleep together with him, and it made him feel unhappy.

After Nao wriggled into his new futon, Dad turned out the light and turned on a small desk lamp instead. He lay on his stomach and opened a book. Nao started to get nervous when he realized he would be alone with Dad until Mister finished his work. He had played a lot during the day, so his body was tired and heavy; he felt like he could fall asleep right this moment, but his mind was strangely wide awake. He tossed and turned every few minutes until his eyes met with Dad's. He quickly looked away.

"...Is my lamp too bright?"

Nao didn't know what he meant.

"Do you have trouble sleeping if it's bright?"

"...Not really."

At home, Nao always turned out all the lights and slept in the dark. But Dad was reading a book; he couldn't ask the room to be darkened.

"Was it fun going to the beach with Kei?"

Dad had been so mad at Mister for going to the beach, yet he was asking if he had fun.

"...Yeah," Nao answered, though he didn't feel like talking.

"I see," Dad murmured before going back to his book. Nao tossed and turned for a while longer, and fell asleep before he knew it.

In the middle of the night, Nao woke up wanting to go to the washroom. He rubbed his eyes in the dark. It felt like no one was in the room. When he turned on the light, Dad and Mister were nowhere to be seen.

Wondering why no one was here, Nao went out into the hallway. The room with the table had the light on. He crept closer and peered through the crack of the open sliding door. Mister was drawing. Across from him, Dad was sitting against the wall and reading a book. *Scratch, scratch, scratch....* The sound of Mister's moving pen echoed loudly.

"Kei, why don't you take a break?" Dad had sounded so angry before, but now the same voice sounded really gentle.

"I'll be done soon. You don't have to wait for me, Takafumi. Go ahead and go to sleep."

Dad shut his book with a soft *fwump*.

"I can't sleep. I feel nervous when he's there. And he—I can tell he's trying to be on his best behaviour in front of me, and he looks so rigid and uncomfortable. I feel bad for the poor kid."

He's talking about me. Nao felt his pulse drumming right to his fingertips.

"Just don't let the small stuff get to you," Mister drawled.

"...Maybe you're right," Dad nodded. "But I'm afraid I might let something slip by accident. And I still haven't been able to get a hold of Mariko yet."

Silence fell in the room. *I'll go pee and then go back to bed.* Nao turned his back to the strip of light.

"I swam in the ocean for the first time. Waves are pretty interesting, huh? Have you swam in the ocean before, Takafumi?"

"I have. —If you enjoyed the beach, we should go together again sometime."

"The two of us?"

"The three of us, if Nao's here."

"Sure. But if it's just you and me, Takafumi, I'd rather be in bed."

"Idiot," Dad muttered in exasperation, and the room became quiet again.

The next day, Nao was woken by his father. It was seven-thirty. He washed his face and went to the room with the table to find only him and Dad there. The table was laid out for two.

"What about Mister...?"

"Kei was working 'til dawn. I want to let him sleep in for a bit."

Today, Dad was wearing a T-shirt with buttons and beige pants. He wasn't wearing a suit like yesterday.

There were only the two of them, so they sat across from each other and ate. Nao felt just as nervous today. *I wonder if Dad's nervous with me around*, he thought while he nibbled at his toast, remembering the conversation he had overheard yesterday. The toast and salad were delicious, but he wasn't able to finish all of it. His portion was a little bigger than how much he usually ate.

The floorboards creaked. Nao turned around to see Mister emerge, rubbing his red eyes.

"...Where's my breakfast?"

"You should have slept in. Can you eat?"

"...So-so."

Dad got to his feet with the dirty dishes and left the room. Mister sat himself down heavily in front of the table and gave a big yawn. Nao felt relieved. The atmosphere changed with Mister around.

"How about... we go to a haunted house today?" Mister asked lazily, slumped over with his cheek on the table.

"A haunted house!"

"You afraid of ghosts?"

"No! I wanna go, I wanna go!"

"Looks like they've opened one at the department store. It's about a thirty-minute drive from here. Takafumi took the day off today, too, so the three of us can go together."

The three of us, with Dad. That bothered Nao a bit. It would have been fine with just Mister and him.

"I don't have a problem with that, but you can't go out until Matsuo comes to pick up your work," Dad said as he placed a tray with toast, salad, and a glass of milk in front of Mister before leaving the room.

"...I completely forgot. Oh yeah, he said he'd come by to pick it up," Mister said to himself as he slathered a generous amount of jam on his toast and stuffed it into his mouth in three bites. He ate the second piece in three bites, too. He ate the salad in two. He finished by drinking his glass of milk in one long draught, then lay down on the spot.

"Mister."

His closed eyes opened just a crack.

"What time are we going to the haunted house?"

"At nine I have to phone Mr. Matsuo and ask him what time he's coming... so it'll be after that. Nao, go help Takafumi."

"Help...?"

"Help him put away the dishes we ate out of. The stepping stool's in the kitchen, right?"

Dad had already tidied the dishes Nao had eaten out of, so Nao gathered Mister's dishes and stacked them. He carried the dishes in his arms and went into the hallway. Shiro the cat meowed and hung about his feet. She had been so aloof before, but now she wove between his feet and rubbed her face against his shins.

"I'll end up stepping on you if you keep doing that."

Nao lifted his feet up as he walked so he wouldn't step on the cat. His body teetered precariously. *Oh no*—he thought, but it was too late. He lost his balance and fell forward. The dishes cascaded to the floor with a loud crash. The sound startled Shiro, and she bounded away outside. Dad came out of the kitchen in a hurry, wearing an apron.

"What happened?"

He approached Nao and helped him up from the floor.

"Are you hurt? Does it hurt anywhere?"

Dad's face was scarier than any pain Nao could feel. The plates and glass were all broken. *I'm going to get in trouble.*

"Th-The cat came around my feet..."

"Cat? You mean Shiro? I don't see her anywhere."

"She was right there. She came right close to my feet, that's why I tripped and..."

Dad let out a sigh through his compressed lips, a kind of exasperated sigh that made Nao's heart feel like it was being wrung.

"Anyway, the cat doesn't matter right now. Does it hurt anywhere?"

"...N-No."

Dad sighed again at my reply.

"You don't have to worry about this here. Go back to the room."

"I—I'll help clean up."

He reached out to the broken dishes, but was slapped on the back of the hand. Dad instantly grimaced as if to say, 'I shouldn't have done that'.

"I'm sorry for hitting you like that," he apologized. "But broken dishes are dangerous. I'll handle this, so go back to the room." His voice was quiet, but scolding. At least to Nao's ears, it sounded like he was being scolded. *Mister was the one who told me to help you. I only did what I was told, but the cat had to come along. If the cat wasn't there, I would've been able to take the dishes to the kitchen just fine. I wouldn't have broke them. It's not my fault. It's the cat's fault.* Nao wanted to say so, but he couldn't. *Dad thinks it's my fault. That's why he's mad—because he thinks I did it.*

Nao went back to the room with the table. Mister was stretched out on the *tatami* floor, fast asleep with his mouth half-open. *Listen to me, listen to my side of the story, Mister.* Nao shook him, but Mister only growled and said "Mmmmmm," in his sleep, and wouldn't wake up.

He heard the *clink-clink* of the broken dishes being cleaned up in the hallway. Nao couldn't bear to listen it, so he went out to the yard through the porch. He put on a pair of bamboo sandals that were a bit too big for him, and fled into the bushes under the tree. Ao barked at him, but eventually stopped when Nao hugged his knees and stayed still.

Dad hates me after all. The thought made tears spring to his eyes. *He already hates me, but he hates me more now because I broke the dishes.* No matter how many times he wiped and wiped his tears with both hands, fresh ones streamed down his face.

"Nao."

I looked up to see Dad calling my name from the room with the table. Mister was still sleeping. Dad called my name a few times, then left the room, still calling my name. I heard the front door rattling open. *Crunch, crunch.* Someone was coming closer through the grass.

"Nao, there you are."

Since we weren't playing hide and seek, he found me right away. I didn't want him to see me crying, so I didn't look up.

"Didn't you hear me calling your name?"

I didn't want to talk to him. Not with someone like him. I curled up like a rock and didn't even shake or nod my head.

"You had me worried because you disappeared suddenly like that. You're still in primary school, and you don't know your way around here. It's dangerous to go out alone. Next time you want to go out to play, let me or Kei know first. We'll go along with you."

I didn't answer.

"You understand what I'm trying to say, right?"

"No, I don't!" I yelled loudly. I felt Dad's presence there for a while, but after a while he went back into the house without saying anything. I regretted it as soon as I was left alone. *I shouldn't have yelled like that. Now he hates me again.* Just thinking about it made more tears fall from my eyes.

I hated Dad. I'd never wanted a dad like that. He wasn't nice, he was cold. He was distant to me. He didn't play with me at all. He was always scolding me, treating me like I was a burden.

I wanted a dad like Mister. He let me ride on his shoulders, he patted me on the head, and he held hands with me. I wanted a dad like him.

Still crying, I curled up on my side in the grass. When I lay sideways, my tears streamed sideways, too. After a while, Ao suddenly started barking.

"Excuse me for bothering you so early in the morning. This is Matsuo from Sakubunkan." I heard a man's voice over at the front door. I heard the rattling of the front door opening, and talking voices. As I watched the room with the table through the blades of grass, a man in a suit and glasses came in. He looked like an office worker. Mister was being shaken awake by Dad, and he sat up with a big yawn.

"I should have taken them to you... sorry."

"No, no, you don't have to worry. I was in the area to pick up another author's work. I should be apologizing for coming over so early in the morning."

The man in the glasses took out the papers from the envelope and slowly went through each one.

"...Your drawings are as detailed and beautiful as ever, Mr. Kitagawa. Right now the only project we have for you is Mr. Hori's serial, but other authors have been asking me if you could illustrate their books."

"...Mm-hmm," Mister said in a disinterested way.

"Are you still reluctant to illustrate for novels, Mr. Kitagawa?"

Mister scratched his head.

"I'm not very educated. Novels have a lot of words I don't understand. If I tried to read one properly, it'd take too much time and it would tire me out."

"I remember you telling me that before. This is just a personal opinion—many of these kinds of detailed drawings tend to look like they've just been copied from something, but your work has none of that. Your drawings have a unique atmosphere about them. Call it a sort of sensuality, if you will. I

think that's what people are attracted to."

"You can flatter me all you want, but you're not getting anything from me."

The bespectacled man opened his mouth laughed out loud.

"It's been five years since you started illustrating professionally, isn't it? I really have to thank Douno for introducing us. We'd drifted apart after graduating from university, but one day I ran into him at an *izakaya* for the first time in over a decade. I remember the first thing he said to me after finding out I was a magazine editor was, 'Do you need anyone who can draw really well?'. I have to admit I was taken aback at first. But I took a look at a few of your pieces, and though they were a bit rough around the edges, I knew I had the beginnings of something. I said to myself, 'This man is made for illustrating books.' Some people say illustrations are just extras, but I don't think so. They're an important factor in helping the imagination."

"I don't really care, as long as I can make enough money to keep myself fed."

The man in glasses shrugged. "That's the strange thing about you, Mr. Kitagawa. From looking at your drawings, I would never get the impression that you were only doing this to feed yourself.

—Well, I'll take these with me, then."

The bespectacled man put the papers in the envelope and stood up.

"Oh, I saw a pair of small shoes in the doorway. Is a child over? Yours?"

—Dad and Mister fell silent at the same time.

"A distant relative is over for the holidays," answered Dad. Nao felt like someone had stabbed something through his already-swollen and aching heart.

"Because the ocean is nice here, and there's a beach," Dad explained.

"Oh, I see," said the man in the glasses, nodding knowingly to him. "I came by train today, and I saw the beach full of people. It is the summer holidays, after all."

Their guest left. As soon as the man went home, Mister rolled over on the floor and went back to sleep. Dad came back into the room and—when he saw Mister sleeping, he left again without saying anything. A little while after that, I heard the door rattling open. The wooden gate slammed shut. Mister was still sleeping. Dad was probably the one who'd gone out.

The cicadas whined. I felt like the buzzing would worm its way into my head too, so I clapped both hands over my ears. My friend had told me before that divorce was what happened when your mom and dad didn't like each other anymore. Dad didn't like Mom anymore, and Mom didn't like Dad anymore. Since Dad hated Mom, he probably came to hate me, too, even before I was born. That's why he didn't tell the man that 'his son' had come over to play. He probably didn't want to think of me as his son. Even if I wasn't born—no, Dad would probably have preferred that I wasn't born.

I had two other kids in my class whose moms and dads were divorced. Both of them lived with their moms, but they told me they saw their dads once every two or three months.

"We'd go to a theme park, or go watch soccer games together. And we'd talk and talk. I love my dad lots. —Nao, aren't you gonna meet with your dad?"

If I could meet my dad in person, we'd play together, talk about lots of things—I was supposed to be able to be like those kids, too. I thought my dad would always be my dad, even if my parents were divorced.

I was excited when I got on the train two days ago. I'd only thought of what kind of fun things

were waiting for me. I'd never even imagined what kind of upsetting or bad things might happen.

I heard rustling. Shiro came close enough for me to touch her. Her tail was pointed straight up, and she had a snobby look on her face. *I fell down in the hallway because you got in my way. If you weren't there, I wouldn't have gotten in trouble by dad. If you'd still been there when the dishes broke, dad wouldn't have thought I'd just blamed everything on you as an excuse.*

Nao grabbed Shiro's tail and yanked it violently. Shiro snarled and bared her teeth, and scratched Nao's hand with her sharp claws.

"Ow!"

Nao let go. Blood welled up on the scratch marks on the back of his hand. A hot surge of anger rose to his head. Nao grabbed a baseball-sized rock close by and hurled it as hard as he could at the white cat.

He was not good at sports. He was a slow runner, and couldn't jump very high. He wasn't good at throwing balls, either. He could never pitch straight, yet today of all days, the rock flew dead straight ahead of him. The rock hit Shiro squarely on the head, and the cat let out a strangled meow before arching like a bow and collapsing on its side.

"...What're you doing?"

All this time I'd thought Mister had been sleeping, but now he was up and staring at me from the porch. He'd seen me throw the rock. Mister had seen me—Nao twisted his face like he was about to cry.

Mister came down into the yard, still barefoot, and hurried towards the cat. The snowy fur above Shiro's right ear was dyed red. —It was bleeding. Nao felt his whole body turn cold.

"Hey, Shiro. Shiro—"

At Mister's voice, Shiro tried to get up, but fell down again. After doing that twice, she lay still and stopped moving.

"Sh—She's dead..." My hands shook violently in the grass at in front of my knees. "Is—Is Shiro dead?"

She was Dad's cat, but I'd killed her. *I had killed her. Oh no, oh no...* Dad would never forgive me now. Tears flooded my eyes.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I..."

Mister went back into the house and came back with a small cardboard box lined with a towel.

"—We're taking her to the hospital."

He put Shiro inside the lined cardboard box and ran. He ran because he didn't have a bike anymore. Nao ran after him, panting. They crossed the small bridge and immediately turned right. After running for a short while, they could see the sign for the animal hospital up ahead.

Once they arrived at the hospital, Shiro immediately went into the examination room. Since owners were to wait in the waiting room, Nao sat side-by-side with Mister on the brown sofa. Nao had been crying the whole time up to their arrival at the hospital. *Shiro, Shiro, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.* He'd apologized over and over in his heart. *If Shiro dies, Dad will hate me even more.* The thought made more tears spill over.

"Is Shiro gonna die...?"

"I dunno," Mister muttered.

"Is Shiro gonna be saved?"

"I couldn't say."

No matter how many times he asked Mister, all he said was "I don't know". No other animals or people were in the examination room. It was very quiet. The sun seeping through the crack in the blinds felt hot on his feet.

"Why did you throw that rock at Shiro?" Mister asked quietly. Nao shook his head vehemently.

"—I don't know."

"There's no way you wouldn't know. I saw you throw it at her."

Nao clenched his fists on his knees.

"...Because I was... mad..."

"And why would you throw a rock at a cat if you're mad?"

"Because—because I broke the plates because she was hanging around my feet. I said it was the cat's fault, but Dad made it sound like I just tripped by myself."

"Takafumi said you tripped and fell because of the cat. You explained to him properly, didn't you?"

"I did, but..."

"Takafumi didn't say you were lying."

"But—but the look on his face said so!"

Mister was looking at me in a troubled way. The door to the examination room opened with a click. The young veterinarian smiled at me when our eyes met.

"Shiro's going to be fine. There are no abnormalities in her X-rays or CT scan. The wound on her head is small. I think it's more like a concussion. But I'm worried about the bleeding that might follow, so we would like to keep her for the night to see how she fares."

As soon as Nao heard that Shiro was going to be alright, he was so relieved he felt like all the strength had left his body. When he saw Shiro lying lifelessly in the white cage after the examination, tears streamed from his eyes again.

Mister took Nao by the hand as he continued to cry, and led him out of the animal hospital. Instead of going straight home, they entered a small park. Nao was sat down on the bench, and in the next moment, received a stern knock on the head with Mister's fist.

"Now you're even. I'm sure it hurt a lot more for Shiro, but cats can't punch humans back."

"Ow, it hurts... it hurts..." Nao sobbed.

The throbbing pain spread from his head to the rest of his body.

"Does it hurt?"

Nao nodded.

"If it hurts, don't ever do what you think is mean or hurtful to other people or animals. Shiro went through much, much more pain than that."

"...I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

"You should be apologizing to Shiro, not me."

"B...But... Shiro wouldn't understand..."

"So it's okay to do nothing if she doesn't understand?"

Nao felt a pang in his chest. He thought hard. "Meow, meow" was all Shiro could say. *What am*

I supposed to do? What should I do?

"I don't know, I don't know!" he cried in frustration.

A large hand plopped down on his head.

"When Shiro comes home tomorrow, be nice to her."

"...Okay," Nao answered in a small, but clear voice. Yes—he would be nice to her. He would give her lots to eat, pet her lots.... He looked up to see Mister no longer beside him. He had disappeared.

"Mister, mister..."

He ran around the entire park, but could not find him. Nao had been left behind, abandoned—when the fact sank in, Nao felt like he had been left all alone in the whole world. He was desolate. Lonely. Scared. —*No, no, no! Don't leave me. Don't leave me here.*

As Nao ran out of the park, he was called by his name. He turned around. Mister was calling to him from across the street. Once the road was clear of cars, Mister crossed the street. Nao threw his arms around Mister's waist and burst into tears.

"What's wrong, hey?" Mister stroked Nao's cheek worriedly. "I was gone buying these, since it's hot outside. Here, eat it."

Mister was offering him a large ice cream cone. Nao took a huge bite. Although it was sweet and delicious, and Mister was back with him, Nao's his eyelids and heart still ached.

"I usually don't do bad things like this. I don't throw rocks at animals or bully my friends."

Mister made loud crunching sounds as he pushed the rest of the ice cream cone into his mouth.

"Those are things you shouldn't even do occasionally. Don't do things you don't like to other people. You have to understand that, or else you won't become a good grownup."

Mister was big, tall, grownup, too. Even though there was a grownup right beside him, Nao started to become unsure of what a grownup was supposed to be like.

"I don't get what a good grownup is."

"I just told you. Don't do things you don't like to other people. Don't make other people do it, either. If you stick to those rules, you won't go wrong anywhere. You'll turn out a good kid."

The ice cream in Nao's hand melted and dribbled onto his thumb. He licked the dripping white cream. It smelled faintly earthy.

"I wanna be a grownup like you, Mister."

"That's no good," Mister refused.

"Why not? If I do the right thing, I'll be a good grownup like you, won't I, Mister?"

"I did a bad thing in the past. I didn't know the difference between good and bad, so I ended up doing something bad."

Nao peered into Mister's face and tilted his head.

"It doesn't look like it."

Mister's eyes crinkled.

"I can't tell you did something bad," Nao insisted.

Mister opened his right hand and placed it on his chest. "Even if you can't see it, there's still something bad inside me. Because of what I did, I was taken away by the police, and I was in jail for a long time. But it also wasn't good that I was the only one to go to jail."

Nao didn't know what Mister was talking about.

"I killed someone."

A cicada was buzzing loudly above their heads. Nao knew this was something to be surprised at, but he was not surprised. He also didn't doubt that it was true.

"I was nineteen. My mom asked me to kill this man. I didn't think of anything, I just killed him. I didn't tell the police that my mom had asked me to kill him. But that was wrong. Though I deserved to be punished for killing him, my mom should have been punished, too. It was wrong for my mom to ask me to kill someone. But at the time, I didn't know whose fault it was, or what I was supposed to do. —I had no idea."

Mister looked at me.

"Nao, are you afraid of me?"

"No."

The pair of eyes on me smiled.

"Now I've taught you proper. As long as you keep that in your heart, you won't go wrong."

The buzzing of the cicadas didn't stop.

"Damnit, it's hot," Mister muttered while wiping his forehead with his palm.

"Where's your mom now, Mister?"

"I wonder? I haven't seen her since I was nineteen."

"Then where's your dad?"

"He's out there being a good-for-nothing."

"Where do goodfernuthings live?"

"Who knows," Mister shrugged, then took my hand and stood up. "I know your mother, you know."

"What? Really?!"

Mister gave an emphatic nod.

"Your mother is a good, kind person. Takafumi, your dad, is a good person, too. He's kind, smart, upright. Much more than me."

Nao pursed his lips.

"You have a father and mother you should be proud of. You have every right to brag about them to your friends. And all *you* need to keep in mind is what's good and what's bad. That's all you need."

We walked, holding hands. I squeezed Mister's big hand as hard as I could. Our shadows fell short on the path. It was really hot outside, but I felt happy holding hands and walking like this.

"Mister, do you know about my big sister, too?"

Mister stopped in the midst of one of his big strides.

"Dad wouldn't tell me about my dead sister."

"You mean Honoka?"

"Was Honoka her name?" It sounded soft and light, like a fluffy cotton ball.

"...Honoka was cute. But don't talk about your big sister in front of your mom or Takafumi."

"Why?"

"Because it's hard for grownups to remember their dead child, too. You don't want to see your

dad or mom looking sad, do you?"

"...No." Nao shook his head.

"I'll tell you all about Honoka," said Mister.

I thought we were going home now, but Mister kept walking along the river. We walked endlessly down the pedestrian walkway until we arrived at the foot of a large bridge. Mister crossed it. From the large bridge which spanned the wide distance of the river, I could see the ocean in the distance. In the centre of the bridge, Mister stepped back a little from the rails and put his palms together.

"Nao, do what I'm doing."

"Why?"

"It's a jinx for good luck."

I placed my palms together like Mister's. Right afterwards, Mister took my hand and started walking. Mister had said he would tell me all about my sister, but I felt like I wasn't allowed to ask. Mister had also looked sad when he talked about her.

When we got home, the gate was ajar. I thought Dad had come home, but we went through the gates and were met with a surprise. A white skirt, a big, wide-brimmed hat. Mom was standing in front of the door.

"Nao!"

Mom ran up to me, crouched, and hugged me tight.

"I—I was worried about you!"

I could tell from how tightly she hugged me that she wasn't lying.

"I'm sorry," Nao mumbled in a small voice.

"When I heard the story from your grandmother, I thought my heart would stop. Coming all this way by yourself... what if you'd gotten lost? What if you'd been kidnapped?!"

Mom stood up. Still holding my hand tightly, she fixed Mister with an angry glare.

"You and Douno must be out of your minds! Why would I let such a small child like him come here by himself?! Why didn't you call me or my mother?!"

"...I'm sorry." Mister lowered his head to Mom.

"It's not Dad's or Mister's fault," I protested. "I lied to Grandma and came here. I really, really wanted to see Dad... that's why..."

"This is a grownup matter. You stay out of this," Mom snapped sternly at me.

"Takafumi's been trying to get a hold of you," Mister said. "He kept calling your cell phone. You were overseas, right?"

Mom's face flushed red and I saw her bite her lip.

"So what if I was?" she said accusingly. "Are you trying to say I'm an irresponsible mother for leaving my child to go on a trip?"

"No, I was just..." Mister looked like he was at a loss.

"This is my life. This child is my son. This has nothing to do with either of you."

Mom's temper was rising. Mister couldn't say anything back to her.

"Don't you have any common sense? Why would you even think I'd let him come to stay in a household with two men? I'm taking Nao home with me. Please don't ever involve yourselves with

him again."

Mom yanked my hand and tried to take me beyond the fence.

"Mom, wait—my backpack." I dug my heels in. "I left my backpack, and it has important stuff in it. I'll go get it now."

Mom was reluctant, but in the end she let me go. I stepped inside the house and got my backpack from the room with the table. Mom had said she was coming home this morning. I'd totally forgotten.

"Did you lie to your mother when you came here?" I heard Mister's voice behind me. I couldn't turn around. I couldn't meet his eyes.

"...Mom wouldn't even tell me Dad's name," I said. "I wanted to see him. That's why I lied to Grandma and got her to tell me."

I thought he would be like Mom and yell at me like a thunderclap, but Mister only patted me on the head.

"Don't make your mother worry too much," he murmured.

Once I slung on my backpack, I turned around. Mister handed me a paper bag.

"Take this home," he said. I peeked inside and saw lots of fireworks. "Light them with your friends," Mister said.

"Kay," I said, and nodded. So many fireworks. *I wish I could've lit them in this garden*, I thought.

"Takafumi bought those fireworks, you know."

I looked up to see Mister crinkling his eyes in a smile.

"He also bought the futon. Takafumi was just surprised at your sudden visit. He doesn't hate you. No one buys fireworks or takes time off work to spend time with a kid he hates."

Inside my chest, something curled in pain. I clutched the fireworks tightly in my arms, on the verge of tears. Mister placed a hand on my head.

"I'm sorry," he said. I didn't understand why he was apologizing.

I was taken by the hand to the front door, and handed over to my mother.

"Mister, wh—where's Dad?" I'd dreaded him so much, but now I wanted to see him. I wanted to see Dad.

"Probably gone to buy lunch. He should be back soon."

I wanted to wait for Dad, but Mom kept pulling me by the hand. I managed to turn my head back.

"Can I come and play again? Can I come back? Can I say sorry to Shiro?"

"Sure you can," Mister said.

"Mister, mister, can you tell Dad I said thank you? Can you tell him I said sorry? Please... please..."

Nao was half-dragged past the gates. His mother yanked his hand forcefully. *I wanted to see Dad's face, I wanted to tell him thank you for the fireworks*. Nao resented his mother for not waiting until Dad came home. He hugged the fireworks to his chest and sobbed as he walked, and soon his mother began to cry, too. She leaned sideways on the wall, covering her face. Her shoulders shook.

"Mom, what's wrong?"

She wouldn't answer. It was Nao's first time seeing his mother cry like this, and he didn't know

what to do.

"Don't cry, Mom. Please?"

His mother cried even harder, and she pulled Nao into a suffocating embrace. A while later, her tears finally receded, and she wiped her red eyes with a handkerchief.

Nao heard a slam in the open lot beside the wall. Dad was climbing out of the white car parked in the lot. There was no doubt about it. It was him—he was back from shopping.

Nao's feet moved before he could think. He left his mother's side and ran up to the car. Just as Dad closed the passenger door, Nao yanked his jacket as hard as he could.

"Huh?" Dad looked surprised. "Wh—Nao?"

Nao hugged the bag to his chest.

"D—Dad, thank you for the fireworks."

"Fireworks?" Dad murmured at first. "Oh," he said, then nodded slightly. "Did Kei show them to you?"

Nao nodded.

"Let's light them in the yard when it gets dark." Dad hesitantly reached out and ran his hand over my head. Softly, carefully. My whole body tingled like I'd been shocked by electricity, and tears almost sprang to my eyes.

"Nao!" Mom's sharp voice rang out behind me. She came up with a scary look on her face and squeezed my hand.

"...It's been a while." Mom's voice was stiff.

"It really has been a while." Dad's voice didn't change much.

"It looks like you're still the same as ever... with Mr. Kitagawa."

Dad dropped his gaze at Mom's prickly tone.

"I'm taking Nao home," Mom said. "Thank you for taking care of him." She turned her back to Dad, and yanked at my hand. We were getting further and further away from Dad.

"Mariko."

Mom's shoulders flinched at Dad's voice. She slowly turned around.

"I bought something for Nao. —Is it alright if I give it to him?"

Mom pursed her lips in a line disapprovingly. She looked down in silence for a while, then released her grip on her child's hand.

"...Go on," she said in a small voice, giving me a push on the back.

I ran over to Dad. Dad took a hat out of the paper bag he'd been holding, and placed it on my head. It was a kids' baseball cap.

"I heard from Kei that you didn't have a hat."

"...Thank you."

"You're welcome." Dad smiled. His eyes narrowed and small wrinkles formed at the edges of his eyes. It was a gentle face. It was the same face I'd seen in the photos.

"Bye, now. Take care...."

—Mom called my name behind me.

Mom bought tickets for two people and went through the ticket gates. The last train had just

gone, and we had about twenty minutes until the next one arrived. No one else was on the platform except for Mom and I.

I clutched the fireworks tightly as I sat on the bench. Mom put her arms around my shoulders and rested her cheek against my head, looking out over the ocean from the platform.

"Mom, why did you start hating Dad?"

Mom's fingers twitched on my shoulders.

"...I don't hate him."

"Then why did you and Dad divorce?"

She wouldn't answer me.

"Dad is so nice, though."

Mom slapped me in the face. In my surprise, I let go of the paper bag, and it tumbled to the ground. The fireworks scattered about my feet. Mom's lips were twisted and she looked like she was about to cry.

"Don't you think I know that?" Mom covered her face with her hands and curled up. "I know he's kind."

Mom was crying. Even though she was the one who hit me, I felt like I was somehow at fault. Watching Mom cry like that made me feel sad, too, and I cried a little while I picked the fireworks off the ground.

People gradually began to gather on the train platform. Mom wasn't crying anymore. She stroked my cheek and said, "I'm sorry for hitting you."

The train came in. Lots of kids came off, holding hands with their moms and dads. Maybe they were going to the beach.

I loved my mom, but I wished I could play a bit longer with Dad and Mister. I wished I'd been able to go to the haunted house—the thought made tears well up in my eyes.

After his summer vacation ended, Nao told his friends about his gentle dad and funny old Mister. Before, he'd been jealous of kids who talked about their dads, but he didn't feel jealous anymore. *My parents are divorced, but I have a really nice dad. I love him lots.* Nao was able to say so proudly. And he was happy that he could say so. The hat that his dad bought for him became his biggest treasure, and he wore it wherever he went.

"Next summer, I want to visit Dad's place again," Nao told his mother one day. His mother, who had refused to tell him his father's name before, shook her head and said, "Absolutely not." But Nao refused to give up. He wanted to see his dad and Mister again.

At first, his mother got upset to the point of hysterics.

"Do you like your father that much? Do you like him more than me?" she had said shrilly, but in the end, she gave in to Nao's persistence and tenacity, and agreed that he could visit them for three days only during the summer holidays.

For every summer vacation after that year, Nao visited the town by the sea where his father's house was. For the three days that Nao was over, his dad and Mister both took time off work, and spent all of their time with him as if to make up for the rest of the year that they had not seen each

other. He swam in the ocean, walked Ao, and gave tinned cat food as a peace offering to Shiro, who now completely hated him; he lit fireworks on the porch, went to the summer festival going on in the next town—three days passed in a flash.

Mister was more fun to play with. Dad usually stood by and watched, but Mister took their games very seriously. He seemed genuinely disappointed whenever he lost to Nao.

Although Nao only visited for three days during his summer holidays, he talked over the phone a lot with Mister and his father. Once he got into middle school, he began to turn to his dad for advice rather than his mom. There were things he didn't feel comfortable discussing with his mother, and his mother was busy enough managing the day's worth of household chores that she had no time or energy to listen to her son.

A lot of the time, Mister answered the phone. Once in a while, Nao would get so carried away chatting with him that he would forget what he had called to talk to his father about.

Soon after Nao entered eighth grade, his mother broke a piece of news to him.

"There's someone special in my life."

His mother's new lover came as a considerable shock to Nao, who had been secretly wishing that his mother and father would patch up their relationship. He was so shocked, before he could think, he found himself making a phone call. Dad was silent for a while on the other end.

"Nao." His voice was quiet and calm. "I think it's a good thing that your mother has found someone she loves."

"But then that means you won't..."

"I'm sorry, Nao, but I have no plans to get back together with your mother again."

The fact that there was no chance for repair shocked Nao more than his mother's new lover.

"Wh—why..."

"It's hard to explain, but... we just can't get back together. But that won't change the fact that you're my son on the register. Things didn't work out between your mother and I, but I do want your mother to be happy."

Nao was relieved to hear those words. He knew now for certain that even though his mother had gotten a new boyfriend, and even if that person were to become his new father, Dad would always be his one and only real father.

In May, his mother, her boyfriend, and Nao dined together. The man's name was Hiroyuki Taguchi, and he was three years older than Dad. In the beginning, Nao could tell that Taguchi was extremely nervous around him—a child—and it made him feel bad. But once Taguchi had a few drinks, Nao soon found out that he was a talkative, cheerful man who laughed a lot. He was kind of like a cross between Dad and Mister.

They ate together four times after that. After their fourth meal, Taguchi brought up the topic with a nervous air.

"Would it be alright for you if your mother and I got married?" he asked. Dad's face crossed Nao's mind. Taguchi was not a bad person. *But he doesn't have to be my father*, Nao thought.

Nao's mother watched him worriedly at his lack of an answer. There was no chance of reconciliation with his father. Dad had said that he wanted Nao's mother to be happy. Nao also wanted his mother to be happy.

"Yes. Please take good care of her." Nao looked Taguchi in the eye and slowly bowed his head.

Taguchi and his mother got married in July. There was no ceremony; they only entered into Taguchi's register and moved into a slightly more spacious condominium.

Nao Takamura became Nao Taguchi, and even though his new father was always around the house like a father should be, Nao couldn't bring himself to call Taguchi "Dad". Nao had his own stiff resolve that Douno would be the only father for him. Taguchi was cheerful and kind, but he was not Nao's real father. He was just a man who lived with them. In Nao's mind, he was always "Mom's husband".

Right after his term-end exams and before his summer holidays, Nao told his mother that he would be going to Dad's place from August 6th to the 8th this year. His mother wore an unusual, strange expression.

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? I go every year."

"Your father's right here at home."

Nao felt slightly offended at his mother's statement. It was like she'd forgotten about his dad in Kanagawa.

"Yeah, but there's only one person I'll call my father."

Sensing her son's irritation, his mother began to say something—then lowered her gaze.

"...I know you're attached to him, Nao, but that's rude to your new father. You haven't called Mr. Taguchi 'Dad' yet, have you?"

Nao suddenly felt awkward. It was true that he'd been feeling guilty towards not calling Taguchi "Dad".

"But Mr. Taguchi says he doesn't mind what I call him. He said he wouldn't force it on me."

"Yes, but deep down, he does want you to call him Dad. Of course he would."

Nao bit down on his lip.

"I do feel bad for Mr. Taguchi, but I want to see Dad, too. I only get to see him once a year."

"Don't go this year, okay? Let's go on a trip with the three of us instead," his mother said gently as if to parley with him.

"I don't want a trip. Just let me go to Dad's house."

"I *said* you are not to go this year!"

"I'm still going!"

Nao insisted on going while his mother insisted that he would not; it became a battle of wills. In the end, Nao left without getting permission from his mother. He said he was going to his grandmother's place, but headed to his father's place instead.

Nao liked his father's old rented house and its ambiance. He exited the station, went through the deserted shopping district, and crossed the small bridge. He felt a sort of relief when he saw the fence of the rented house in the distance.

In reality, the house was old, the creaking of the hallway got worse every year, and when Mister cooked dinner it was curry every time, but even so.... Ao barked while Nao napped in the room with the table. Shiro approached him cautiously, apparently finally ready to forgive him.

The following year, Nao went to his father's house again during the summer holidays. His

mother no longer told him not to go.

"Keep quiet to Hiroyuki about this," she said to him. So Nao did not tell Taguchi that he was going to see his real father over the holidays.

In the autumn of Nao's ninth grade, his little brother was born, bringing a rush of hustle and bustle to his home. His little brother was always in a good mood, laughed often, and became very attached to Nao, who took care of him often in the place of his busy mother. Soon, his brother began to talk in broken words. Nao worried that his brother might find it weird that he always called Taguchi "Mr. Taguchi", and so began to call him "Dad" instead. The first time he said "Dad" to Taguchi, the man, who had been talking and laughing until that moment, suddenly began to cry. Nao was startled. Although Taguchi had always said he didn't mind what Nao called him, it had probably bothered him that he was never called "Dad." *I must've given him a hard time*, Nao thought in regret.

At the beginning of eleventh grade, Nao went through career guidance. He wrote that he wished to go into the faculty of arts of a private university, but his mother did not seem too keen. The fact that it was a private school seemed to be an issue, and even if Nao explained to her that there was a specific professor whose lecture he wanted to take, his mother only looked at him worriedly and asked, "But what are you going to study?" His career guidance teacher warned him that females were usually the ones who intended to go into the faculty of arts, and he also warned Nao that arts would limit his career options. Everyone around him seemed to say it was a bad idea. This made Nao uncertain. Private schools had high tuition, and his little brother would cost their family a lot of money in the coming years as well. "Do what you want to do," Taguchi had said, when Nao had gone to him for advice. But later, he overheard Taguchi telling his mother that he thought it would be a better idea for Nao to go into finance or science and technology.

After an endless cycle of weighing his options, Nao finally went to his father for advice. His father asked Nao what school and faculty he wished to get into, asked him why, then hung up the phone, telling him he would call back tomorrow or the day after. Two days later, Nao's father called his cell phone.

"You should go to the university you're aiming for," he said.

"Why?"

"Well, you want to go, don't you?"

"Yeah, but..."

"What happened to your enthusiasm?" Dad laughed. "I researched that university you were talking about, Nao, and... well, now I know what you want to study and the professor you want to learn from. If you have a goal as clear as that, I don't have a reason to say no. I'm actually envious that you have such a clear-cut goal."

"Really?" Nao couldn't help but ask at the unexpected answer.

"I went to university without really knowing why. I think choosing a flexible faculty is one way to do it if you have no idea what you want to learn, but you're not like that. I think it's a wonderful thing that you have a goal."

"B-But Mom doesn't really seem to get it, and the guidance teacher told me it would limit my options."

"That might be true, but you really like that professor, don't you, Nao? That feeling of liking

something, enjoying something, is going to give you strength in life. As long as you stay true to what you like, I'm sure it'll work out. Besides, we humans aren't as good at faking ourselves as we think we are. I'm sure it would be stressful for you to work hard at something you don't like."

His father's words swept everything away, even the uncertainty that had been settling in Nao's own heart. His father did not merely say "yes" without meaning it, like Taguchi. He thought everything out well before giving his opinion. He was not neglectful of his words. Nao knew it wasn't right to compare the two, but he couldn't help it. *Taguchi doesn't try to have a serious discussion with me. It's almost like he's afraid of being disliked.*

Now free of uncertainty, in the winter of his third year of high school, Nao applied to the private university in Tokyo he had been longing to go to, and was accepted. As he searched for a place to live, Nao began to wonder if it would be possible to stay at his father's house. Although the university was in Tokyo, it was more on the west side. When Nao looked it up, it was quite close to his father's house. The trip was less than thirty minutes by train. It was well within commuting distance.

Although Nao had defied his parents to get into this university in order to learn from a particular professor, the financial aspect of going to a private school still bothered him. He planned to work a part-time job on the side, of course, but if he could save money on rent by living with his father, he was sure it would help his family's finances greatly.

His father's rented house was old and worn, but it had a good number of rooms. Nao knew that they had a room that they only used for storage, containing piles of boxes. Nao also knew that since getting remarried, his mother had become even more disapproving of Nao going to his father's place. But Nao was almost graduating high school and going to university. He felt like he should at least be free to visit his real father. His mother always said it would offend Taguchi, but Taguchi was a good man. Nao felt like Taguchi would understand if he explained how he felt.

That day, Nao was playing with his little brother in his lap as his mother made dinner.

"Mom, about where I'm going to stay in Tokyo," he began.

"Did you find a good place? Or should we go together to a real estate agent first beforehand?"

His mother answered with her back to him, her knife making steady chopping sounds against the cutting board.

"Yeah, about that... I'm thinking of staying over at Dad's place."

The chopping stopped. His mother turned around.

"By 'Dad', you mean..."

"Dad in Kanagawa. My university's out west, so it's pretty close, and Dad has an extra room. You know how high my tuition will be because my school's private. I'll get a part-time job, but I'll be able to save money on rent, too, if I stay over at his house."

"What are you saying?" His mother's expression was a cross between anger and reluctance.

"I'm serious," Nao said. "I think Mr. Taguchi will agree. He's understanding. Besides, I'm going into university now. I think I can decide things for myself."

His mother furrowed her brow and bent her finger slightly at her lips.

"But... Mr. Kitagawa lives in that house, too."

"Oh, right. But I don't think Mister will mind if I'm there. I haven't talked to Dad about this yet, though. I wanted to tell you first."

There was a strange pause as they simply stared at each other. Although Nao had made a pretence of asking his mother for input, he was already ninety-percent sure that he would be staying at his father's house. The remaining ten percent that would possibly prevent him was Taguchi's refusal.

His mother washed her hands, and came down to sit at the dining table across from Nao. *She's serious about not letting me go*, Nao thought, and put himself on guard.

"I will not allow you to stay at Douno's house." It was almost a command. Nao felt a twinge of irritation that he wasn't even being given a chance to discuss it.

"It's not for you to decide whether I'm allowed to go or not. If Mr. Taguchi and Dad say yes, I'm going to stay there."

"Why does always it have to be Douno?" his mother accused shrilly. "Are you saying you like him more than Hiroyuki?!"

Nao hated his mother's emotional interrogations. She had asked him the same question over and over since he was little.

"This isn't about who's better or who's worse. Dad is Dad, and Mr. Taguchi is Mr. Taguchi. You can't ask me to compare the two."

His mother dropped her gaze, pressed a hand to her forehead and sighed testily. She ran a hand through her bangs, scratched her hairline irritably, fiddled with her earlobe, then finally lifted her face. She looked straight at Nao severely.

"It's about time you grew up and got over Douno. You're not a child anymore."

"Get over? What's that supposed to mean? I'm not going there to be babied by Dad. I just thought it would help our family if..."

"If you live there, you'll only cause trouble for Douno."

"How would you know if it's trouble for Dad unless you ask him?"

"You aren't Douno's son." His mother had spoken slowly and clearly enough. But Nao couldn't help but question her back.

"Huh?"

"You aren't Douno's son. —When we were still married, I cheated on him with another man and got pregnant with you. I loved Douno, so I didn't want to be apart, but he wouldn't forgive me. He kept requesting a divorce, but I didn't listen to him because I didn't want to... and while all of that was going on, you were born. I asked him not to file a denial of legitimacy to court, so Douno is your father on the family register. But you have no biological ties to him."

"Wh... what the hell..." His throat was dry. His voice shook. His arms, which held his little brother, were also shaking. His mother saw it and took Nao's brother from his arms. Nao slumped over and held his head in his hands.

"If you're saying Dad... isn't my real Dad, then whose son am I...?" he asked in a low growl.

"Hiroyuki Taguchi," his mother said quietly. Nao slowly looked up.

"Your current father, Hiroyuki, is your real father," she repeated.

I don't know what the hell is going on anymore, he thought in desperation.

"I cheated on Douno with Hiroyuki. We'd already broken up before I got divorced with Douno, but we ran into each other again seven years ago. Both of us had gone through a lot of... just a

lot of things, and although we both had our fair share of troubles, we thought maybe this time we would be able to get things right. We talked about it over and over, and finally decided to get together again. Hiroyuki was crying, saying he could finally be a real father to his son."

Nao had always thought Douno was his father. He had believed it so firmly that he had never thought otherwise. Nao remembered the first time he visited that house in Kanagawa during his summer vacation. He remembered being gently patted on the head—and being so moved by it that his heart trembled. All this time, he had thought it was because Douno was his father. He had always thought he felt this way because that was how a son felt towards his dad.

"...Cheated on him?" Nao growled, his head still bowed. "What the hell? Why did it have to be Taguchi? Way for you two to spit in Dad's face!"

"There's nothing I can do about what you say. It's true that I cheated. —But Douno hasn't been alone all this time, either. He's always had Mr. Kitagawa with him."

"...Mister...?" Nao raised his head.

"Mr. Kitagawa is Douno's lover."

Nao didn't know what to think anymore. *I'm having enough trouble accepting the fact that I'm not Dad's son, but to hear that Dad and Mister are lovers...? What? Sure, they got along really well. They were really close, but they didn't seem like lovers. They were never all over each other. They just seemed like good friends who lived together.*

His mind was a mess. *Mom cheated with Taguchi, I was born, and she got divorced with Dad. After they got divorced, Mom remarried her boyfriend, Taguchi, and Dad became lovers with Mister. It made sense in words. It made sense, but Nao's emotions could not keep up. He didn't want to acknowledge it.*

"So Dad... he knows I'm not his real son, right..."

"Yes. That was the reason why we got divorced."

A child born from his wife's affair. Nao was that child. Then what was I to Dad? Proof of his wife's betrayal? Unshakable proof of her mistake?

Nao covered his mouth with his hands. *Mom and Taguchi aren't the ones spitting in Dad's face. It was me. Me—for being alive. On Nao's first visit during the summer, his father had been awkward and aloof at first. Now he could understand why. There was no way Dad would have been happy to see me. No way he could have found me endearing. No way he could have loved me.*

*But still—*Nao thought. He had indeed felt like he had been loved. He had felt like they cared about him. Indeed, in that house, with those two men, he had felt very much loved. They took time off to spend with him every year during his summer holidays. They listened attentively to his stupid stories; they patiently thought through all of life's little troubles with him.

"—Dad never said anything to me."

Nao's little brother began to cry, and his mother comforted him by rocking him lightly.

"...Every summer after that time you went to Douno's house in primary school, you'd throw a tantrum and say you were going to see him, do you remember? That's when I phoned Douno and we talked. We decided that maybe you still needed a father in your life, so Douno said, 'if it's fine with you, I'll play the father until you remarry'. But even after I remarried, you still thought Douno was your father, and you were so attached to him.... You were still so small. I couldn't bring myself to tell you the truth."

His mother sighed, still holding his little brother in her arms.

"Douno must have cared for you very much—enough to make you believe without a doubt that he was your real father."

Tears sprang to Nao's eyes. His father's kindness, his gentle lies, and Nao's own childish wish—*why couldn't he have been my real dad? Why couldn't I have had him instead?*—made him weep.

"I think you were a very fortunate child," his mother said quietly.

After graduating university, Nao began working at a major publisher called Shinkasha. Shinkasha issued a literary magazine called *Quo Vadis*, and Nao hoped to land a position in its editorial department. However, he was instead placed into the editorial department of a monthly medical journal.

Not only was this totally different from what he requested, medical journals like these contained a lot of jargon. Learning the words was a mission in itself. Not only that, the academic papers which made up the bulk of the content were entirely different in structure and objective compared to novels. Nao had to begin by fundamentally restructuring his mindset.

As an editor fresh out of school, like any new graduate, he was useless at first. Nao settled into the routine of being ordered around by his seniors: collecting material and putting it away as he was told, occasionally being put in charge of a marginally-important page, then being yelled at for spending so much time on an insignificant piece.

By the time June rolled around, Nao had grown slightly more accustomed to his senior's yelling, and had stopped flinching every time. One day, he was handed an illustration of an organ and told to file and put it away. Nao was surprised to see it signed by Kei Kitagawa.

It was Mister. Dad's lover who lived with him. Even though he knew Douno was not his real father, Nao still always thought of him as "Dad".

Although he had been surprised to find out the two men were lovers, it did not give him a reason to hate them. *I remember Mister was really good at these kinds of illustrations. He used to draw them all the time. It brought back nostalgic memories. The first year I went, he ignored his deadline to spend time with me, and got into huge trouble by Dad. From the next year, the two of them took work off for the whole three days I was there and spent every hour with me. Mister never took out his drawing supplies when I was around, so I completely forgot he was an illustrator.*

Mister was still doing what he was good at, illustrating for books. If he was working, that probably meant he was doing well. As for Dad... and Ao? Shiro? Since being told that he wasn't Douno's son a little before his high-school graduation, Nao had not gone back to his father's place. There was no way he could.

At lunch that day, Nao nonchalantly went up to the senior who had told him to put away the illustration, Saikawa, and broached the topic.

"About that illustration I put away earlier... it was really well-drawn."

Saikawa was wolfing down a bun at his messy desk.

"Illustration?" He tilted his head. "Oh, you mean Mr. Kitagawa's," he murmured. "He's a famous illustrator in this field. He's good at drawing detailed pictures, which is perfect for diagrams

of organs and stuff. Plus, he works fast. He's got a lot of authors who are fans, so he draws for literary magazines sometimes, too."

"I see..." Since Nao had intended to work at a publisher, he had always routinely perused many literary magazines, but he had never spotted Kitagawa's illustrations.

"Have you met Mr. Kitagawa before?" he asked.

"Yeah. He's a handsome person in his fifties. He can be a bit brusque, so I thought he was a bit scary at first. But once you get to talk to him, it's not that bad."

I guess everyone's first impression of Mister is the same, Nao thought in amusement. Saikawa glanced around before suddenly lowering his voice.

"You didn't hear this from me, but—I heard Mr. Kitagawa is gay."

Nao's heart jumped.

"I knew he'd been living with another guy for a long time, but I think about three years ago? Suddenly he changed his last name to Douno. He still signs his work as Kitagawa, though. All of us in the editorial department were talking about it, how strange it is for him to do that at this age."

"Uh-huh..."

"Someone asked him in person, and apparently he said he got adopted. I guess they couldn't ask for any more details."

Seeing Nao's lack of reaction, Saikawa wrapped up his story briskly. "Well, I guess that's not a shocking story to hear nowadays," he said. "I'm not complaining. Whether he's gay or otherwise, at least he gets his work done."

That day, Nao stayed behind in the editorial department and searched for any work that Kitagawa had done at this publisher. Medical journals, botanical journals, literary magazines... Kitagawa's illustrations turned up everywhere.

Nao wished he could speak to his father. *Dad, Mister's done so much work, and been acknowledged by so many people. He's pretty amazing, isn't he? He's a bit of a celebrity.* Nao wished he could say all of it to his father in person.

He knew the telephone number of his father's house in Kanagawa, and his father's cell phone number. Even when Nao switched cell phone models, even if he didn't keep in touch with them anymore, he never deleted these two numbers from his phone book.

Nao stared at the cell phone on his desk. He knew everything now. He was no longer an ignorant child. His rational self knew he shouldn't call. So he didn't. He could restrain himself. —But at the same time, he felt forlorn.

One year and one month passed since Nao was placed in the editorial department. It was right after the end of Golden Week in May. One Sunday, Nao came into work on his day off because one of the authors' manuscripts was running late. He received the manuscript by courier and began checking it straightaway at the editorial office.

Past five in the evening, Nao had just started thinking of wrapping up and going home when Saikawa came in. He wandered into the office and began rifling through the things on his desk.

"What brings you here today?" Nao asked.

Saikawa smiled wryly when his eyes met with Nao's.

"One of the illustrators I'm in charge of passed away. The chief editor called me with the news.

Told me tomorrow is the funeral. I heard he wasn't doing well, but I didn't think he would die. Supposedly the funeral's going to be at the rented house he lived in, but I couldn't find my planner or his business card anywhere at home, so I don't know his address... oh, there we go. Is this it?"

Nao froze when he saw the envelope that Saikawa was holding. On the back of the envelope, which was addressed to the editorial department, it was written "Kei Douno".

"Wh—Who did you say passed away?"

"Mr. Kitagawa, the illustrator. —Kanagawa, huh? I've never been there. I guess once I get into the area, I can just ask the taxi driver to take me there..."

Saikawa cut away the address from the envelope.

"What are *you* doing in the office?" he asked. "Oh, Mr. Satake's manuscript? He's always late, isn't he? Well, good luck with that."

Saikawa made to leave the room, but Nao called him back.

"Um!" he said in a loud voice. "I-Is the wake tonight?"

"Probably. What, you going?" Saikawa tilted his head. "The wake is a family-only thing, isn't it? Besides, you haven't met Mr. Kitagawa before. If you're gonna go, you should go tomorrow. You can come with me, if you want."

"...No, that's alright."

Immediately after Saikawa left the room, Nao tossed aside the manuscript he was holding and drove back to his apartment to change into his mourning clothes. Less than half a month at his job, Nao was made to attend a work-related funeral. Since he had no mourning clothes at the time, he had to run into a store just short of closing to buy a set. Having learned his lesson, he now kept a suit for funerals and envelopes for condolence money in a corner of his closet. He had never thought they would come in useful now.

Nao changed and got straight into his car. From a regular road, he merged onto the highway. After getting his driver's license four years ago, the first thing Nao did was buy a used car. Although he couldn't go to his dad's place, he did drive a couple times to the beach they always used to go to.

Nao thought to himself—here he was speeding along in his car, but was it really true that Mister was dead? The words, the facts, didn't seem real. Sure, it was possible, but he had a hard time believing it because he hadn't seen anything with his own eyes.

Nao's last memories were of five years ago, when they went fishing together. Despite being the one to suggest going, Mister didn't seem to be cut out for fishing. He reeled in empty line after empty line as Dad laughed at him.

How old was Mister? He was two years younger than Dad, which would make him only in his late fifties. It was too early for him to die. Just a bit too early.

Nao drove determinedly in the direction of the setting sun. The glare in his face was blinding. Sunsets were an everyday sight, yet this one seemed more desolate than usual, persistently appearing in his line of sight. It was... irritating.

After about forty minutes on the highway, Nao got off the ramp onto a regular road. He had expected to hit gridlock, but traffic was smooth, perhaps because it was Sunday. He drove along the shoreline, passed through the railway crossing, the front of station, and passed the police station. He turned at Ito's Barbershop, and parked his car in the parking lot of a supermarket that had been built

when he was in high school. Nao knew there was no space to park near the house. *Maybe I'm actually pretty calm right now*, he thought as he locked his car.

As he left the parking lot, he naturally broke into a run. Beyond the bridge that he once crossed in seven steps, he could see the old detached house. The moment he saw the black and white drapes put up on the surrounding fence, he felt his heart go cold. His feet refused to move further. The threat of reality crept up to him.

I have to make sure this is real. If I don't, it would defeat my whole purpose of coming here. Nao slowly began to walk. He passed through the gates for the first time in five years, and faintly heard a voice reading the sutra from the yard. Off to the side of the concrete walkway, a place had been set up to sign his name. A middle-aged woman, perhaps in her early fifties, bowed her head to Nao when he offered his condolence money to her.

"Please go inside," she said.

Nao slowly set foot inside the house. When he entered the familiar doorway, he caught a whiff of incense. He walked down the dim and creaky hallway into the room with the table. A small altar had been set up inside, and a Buddhist monk was reading the sutra. The photo in the black frame was definitely of Mister. His aged face wore a carefree, boyish grin.

It hit him visually. Reality overwhelmed him. It was true—the fact sank into his heart. Then came panic.

Near the wall sat Dad, wearing his mourning clothes, and a middle-aged man about the same age—no, perhaps a little younger. They both sat kneeling. His dad noticed him, and blinked in surprise.

"Please accept my... condolences." Nao disguised his agitation with formalities. He knelt on the *tatami* floor, and bowed his head until his forehead touched the mat.

"I know I'm in no position to be here today. But Mister was so good to me. Please let me offer incense to him one last time."

"Nao, lift your face." It was a quiet voice. Nao looked up. Dad's eyes, when he looked at him, were as gentle as they used to be.

"Thank you for coming. I'm sure Kei would have wanted to see you, too. Go on and pay him a visit. He's gotten a bit thinner than when you knew him, though..."

Nao cautiously approached the coffin. Mister lay inside wearing white clothes, with a pale face like a doll's. His cheeks were hollow, and he was considerably thinner. His hair was white—he had aged.

When they'd first met, Nao had thought him a tall and scary man. But he soon came to like—and love—him.

A hot surge reared up in his chest, and his tears spilled over. *I should have been more impudent. I should have acted like I did when I invited myself over in grade school, appealing for love and attention; I should have visited anyway, pretending to know nothing, to have heard nothing. I wish I could have talked to Mister more. I loved him so much—I always wanted to be a big-hearted man like him.*

The tears did not stop flowing. Dad gently put an arm around Nao's shoulders from behind.

"If you like... you can rest in that room over there."

It wasn't until Nao was helped to his feet that he realized he had thrown himself face-down

and wept, heedless of the person behind him waiting to offer incense next. The room he was shown into to rest was what the two men had been using as bedroom. Dad returned to the room with the table. Left alone, Nao's memories and sentiments kept him weeping endlessly. How long had he stayed like this? Nao lay on his back staring blankly at the ceiling when he sensed the sliding door being opened.

"Nao."

His name was called, and he got up.

"The wake is over."

Now to think of it, he could no longer hear the sutra being read. Dad had also taken off his jacket.

"You haven't eaten anything, have you? Have this, if you like."

On the tray was a rice ball and a bowl of *miso* soup.

"Tomoko... my sister—made these and left them behind."

"It's okay. I don't really feel like eating."

"Have a bite, at least. Put something in your stomach," Dad insisted. "Once you finish eating, come out to the room with the altar."

Dad left. Nao stared at the rice ball that had been left behind. He wasn't hungry, but his dad's words lingered with him. *Have a bite, at least.* So he took two bites of the rice ball. He took the rest of the food on the tray back to the kitchen.

Now that the wake was over, the house was still and silent. There was not a sound to be heard. When Nao peered into the room with the altar, he was surprised to see Dad alone beside the coffin, drinking a can of beer. For a man as straight-laced as him, it seemed a little insensitive.

"Feeling better now?" Dad asked.

"Oh, uh, yeah..."

"How did you get here? By train? Or did you take a taxi?"

"I drove. Parked the car at the supermarket before the bridge..."

Dad looked at his watch.

"It's nine... that place closes at eight. Shops in the countryside close early. They'll chain the parking lot off, too... oh, but there might still be someone left in the office right now. Do you want me to call?"

"That's okay. I'll take a taxi home or something."

"Really...? I'm sorry—it isn't very accessible in the countryside. And I've already made you come such a long way."

Dad took another draught of beer. Nao gazed at his surroundings.

"There's no one else around?"

"My sister booked a hotel room nearby with her husband."

The shadows formed starkly on Dad's face. He looked tired. Mister had aged, but Dad had also gotten older as well.

"It's probably going to be crazy tomorrow," Dad said to himself. "But I guess there wouldn't be many visitors coming to pay condolences. I don't know where Kei's parents are. I guess the only people who'd come would be people from his work. My parents have already passed, so my sister is

the only person from our side of the family.”

Dad sounded detached. He spoke and drank, in an almost mechanical manner.

“Come to think of it, Nao, aren’t you of age? —Care for a drink with me?”

“I’ll... pass.”

“Alright,” Dad said, smiling a little. “I’m happy you came. I wasn’t expecting you to show up. I’m sure Kei’s happy, too. I’m just wondering how you found out—I didn’t tell Mariko about this.”

“I’m an editor at this company called Shinkasha.”

Dad blinked in surprise.

“So you got a job at a publisher.”

“One of my seniors was in charge of Mister, and I heard from him.”

“I see,” Dad murmured. “Nao’s an editor, Kei. Your prediction was off. You said Nao would probably become a public servant.”

“Really?”

“He said you were bound to become one because you were the serious and grounded type. You were so sure, weren’t you, Kei—?”

Dad kept talking to the coffin as if expecting a reply. *Maybe he’s drunk*, Nao thought. But he wasn’t saying anything funny, and his speech was not slurred.

“Can I ask what Mister was sick with?”

Dad lowered his gaze.

“Lung cancer. And he never even smoked. By the time we found out, it was too late. He couldn’t even get an operation. Since finding out, it’s been half a year... it was all a blur.”

The window was thrown open. Nao thought he heard noises coming from the yard, but there was no one there. The leaves were fluttering. Maybe the wind had picked up.

“Dad, where’s Ao?”

“Ao died. Three years ago, if I remember correctly. —I think he lived a long and fulfilling life, but it hit Kei really hard. It was painful to see him like that. That dog was the puppy of another dog that Kei brought home, and Kei was really attached to him. Shiro also disappeared around the same time. Kei said he’d never take in an animal again, but he was finally starting to turn around. We were just talking about getting another pet when his illness was discovered, and then... things have just been left hanging.”

Dad rocked the can of beer, and it made a sloshing sound.

“Are Mariko and Mr. Taguchi doing well?” he asked. “Your little brother must be in primary school now.”

Nao remembered now, why he could not come here anymore.

“I’m sorry.” Nao bowed his head. “I’m sorry. I... I had no idea what happened between you and Mom...”

“You don’t need to apologize.”

“But me and Mom... to you, it must’ve felt like we were spitting in your face. And then Mom going and remarrying Taguchi—”

Dad smiled.

“It really doesn’t bother me. In the end, I’m the one who abandoned our relationship without

trying to mend it. I was surprised when you visited us for the first time, though. But it was fun playing father and son. At first I only meant it to be an imitation, but soon I felt like you really were my son. Like when you'd come to me for advice about boyhood troubles. I felt so sheepish, but it was so funny. And I was happy. I think Kei was the same. He liked kids, so he was lonely when you stopped coming. 'You think he'll ever come again?' he used to say."

As soon as Nao heard those words, he choked up. Tears welled in his eyes.

"But I'm Taguchi's kid," he protested. "I'm the result of Mom's affair. How could I ever come back—"

"You know," Dad said as he looked down. "It didn't matter whose child you were. You as a person, Nao, were dear to me. Even if you didn't have the title of a son, you should have just visited as a friend."

Dad placed the can of beer on the *tatami* floor.

"I think I've had enough to drink. It wouldn't make a very good impression if the chief mourner was hung over, would it?"

Dad turned behind him to look at the altar, and murmured.

"—I wish I could have died with you."

Nao swallowed hard. Dad turned back around. He was smiling.

"I was kidding. But now that it's happened, I'm starting to think maybe it was a good thing that Kei went first. When our dog died, he couldn't eat properly for a month. He was always sensitive about those kinds of things, if nothing else."

Dad wasn't crying. He was smiling. But Nao felt like there was something wrong with that. His lover was dead. A man he had been living with for years was dead. —*He shouldn't be smiling.*

"Dad... aren't you sad?"

"I am," Dad said, his head slightly bowed.

"Don't you want to cry?"

There was a slight pause.

"But it's not like crying is going to bring Kei back... ah, maybe I've had too much to drink after all." As Dad tried to get to his feet with his beer, Nao grabbed his left hand. Dad remained slightly bent over, his somewhat vacant gaze settling on Nao.

"You don't deserve this, Dad."

His face showed surprise, then twisted as if in pain.

"...You don't deserve this."

The can of beer slipped from his right hand and fell to the floor. Dad looked down and covered his face with his hand. His shoulders trembled. With his left hand, he returned Nao's grip with so much strength it hurt.

For a little while after Mister's funeral, Nao commuted to his work from Kanagawa. His father had never asked him to keep him company, but Nao didn't want to leave him alone.

Finally, in the second week, his father spoke up.

"I appreciate your concern for me, but you have your own life," he said. "You should go back

to your own apartment.”

He was right, and Nao knew his father could handle himself. But his worry still lingered. Nao ended up leaving a dog behind before returning to his apartment.

He went to a pet shop and asked for a dog, any breed of dog, just one that had a long life. The associate appeared at a loss for some moments, then murmured, “I guess you’d want a mongrel, then.” The associate told him that although their store did not sell mongrels, Nao could probably find a dog up for adoption at an animal hospital or pound.

Dad looked like he had mixed feelings about the black puppy Nao had picked up at the pound, but he still agreed to take care of it. Nao began to use “checking up on the dog” as an excuse to frequent his father’s house in Kanagawa.

The black puppy had grown into a full-sized dog when Nao began dating his girlfriend, who was a freelance writer. Nao took her along to visit his father. When he and his girlfriend got married the next year, and when they had a baby, Dad was the first to know after Nao’s parents.

“Mr. Douno seems more like a father than a friend,” Nao’s wife had said to him once.

“Yeah, we pretend we’re father and son,” Nao had replied.

“You are *so* strange,” his wife had said with a laugh.

In the seventh year of their marriage, on the last day of their combined six-day Obon³ and summer vacation, Nao was on the train with his son, who was turning five. He had promised in advance that he would take his son to the beach on this day. Nao had planned to go by car, but since his wife insisted that she wanted the car for her business trip, Nao had relented.

The train rocked as it sped through a narrow alleyway-like gap. His son sat beside him. He had been overjoyed that they were going by train instead of by car, but now, he sat sullenly without a word. This was due to the severe scolding Nao had given him before they left. His son had gotten into a fight at kindergarten with a kid of the same age, and ended up hurting him. The fight had started when his son had taken the boy’s toy away from him. Nao heard about this incident for the first time from wife this morning.

“Keita.”

Nao called his name. Keita looked at him with a scowl. Nao sat his sullen son on his lap.

“When you go back to kindergarten, you’ll say sorry to the kid you hurt, won’t you?”

His son stubbornly kept his mouth shut. Nao took Keita’s hand and pinched the back of it hard.

“Ow!” Keita cried loudly, flailing his arms and legs. Large tears welled up in his eyes.

“I heard the kid you hurt was bleeding. For him, it hurt much, much more than this.”

Keita pouted, on the verge of tears.

“Don’t do things you don’t like to other people. Don’t make other people do it, either. If you stick to those rules, you won’t go wrong. You’ll turn out a good kid, Keita.”

Nao felt like he’d heard his own words, the same words, somewhere else before. But where? Before he could recall it, the scenery out the window suddenly burst into view.

3 Obon is a Buddhist holiday in mid-July or mid-August which lasts for three days. Many companies give workers leave during this time.

The same glittering ocean he had seen on his summer vacation in primary school stretched before his eyes.